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Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro
The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt
(Hey, How About Treason?)

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(Hey, How About Treason?)
Toru Toba
Illustration Falmaro

...Gently now. Gently.
Ninym rested her head on Wein's chest and nuzzled her cheek against him like a puppy snuggling with its master.
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Holy King
Silverio
Caldmellia
Holy Elite
Agata
Wein
The curtain rises.
The beasts of the West conspire.
Holy Elite
Miroslav
Holy Elite
Steel
Holy Elite
Tigris
Skrei
Holy Elite
Gruyere

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Princess Falanya."
Leader of Patura
Felite
At the party where leaders of nations mingled with each other, Cosimo introduced Falanya to a certain suntanned young man.
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YEN ON
New York

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Toru Toba

Translation by Jessica Lange
Cover art by Falmaro

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TENSAI OUJI NO AKAJI KOKKA SAISEI-JYUTSU~SOUDA, BAIKOKU SHIYOU~ volume 8
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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor
New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: February 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Toba, Toru, author. | Falmaro, illustrator. | Lange, Jessica (Translator), translator.
Title: The genius prince's guide to raising a nation out of debt (hey, how about treason?) / Toru Toba ; illustration by Falmaro ; translation by Jessica Lange.
Other titles: Tensai ouji no akaji kokka saisei-jyutsu, souda, baikoku shiyou. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2019–
Identifiers: LCCN 2019017156| ISBN 9781975385194 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN9781975385170 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975309985 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975310004 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975313708 (v. 5 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975319830 (v. 6 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975321604 (v. 7 : pbk.) | ISBN 9781975335878 (v. 8 : pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Princes—Fiction.
Classification: LCC PL876.O25 T4613 2019 | DDC 895.6/36—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019017156

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-3587-8 (paperback)
978-1-9753-3588-5 (ebook)

E3-20211222-JV-NF-ORI

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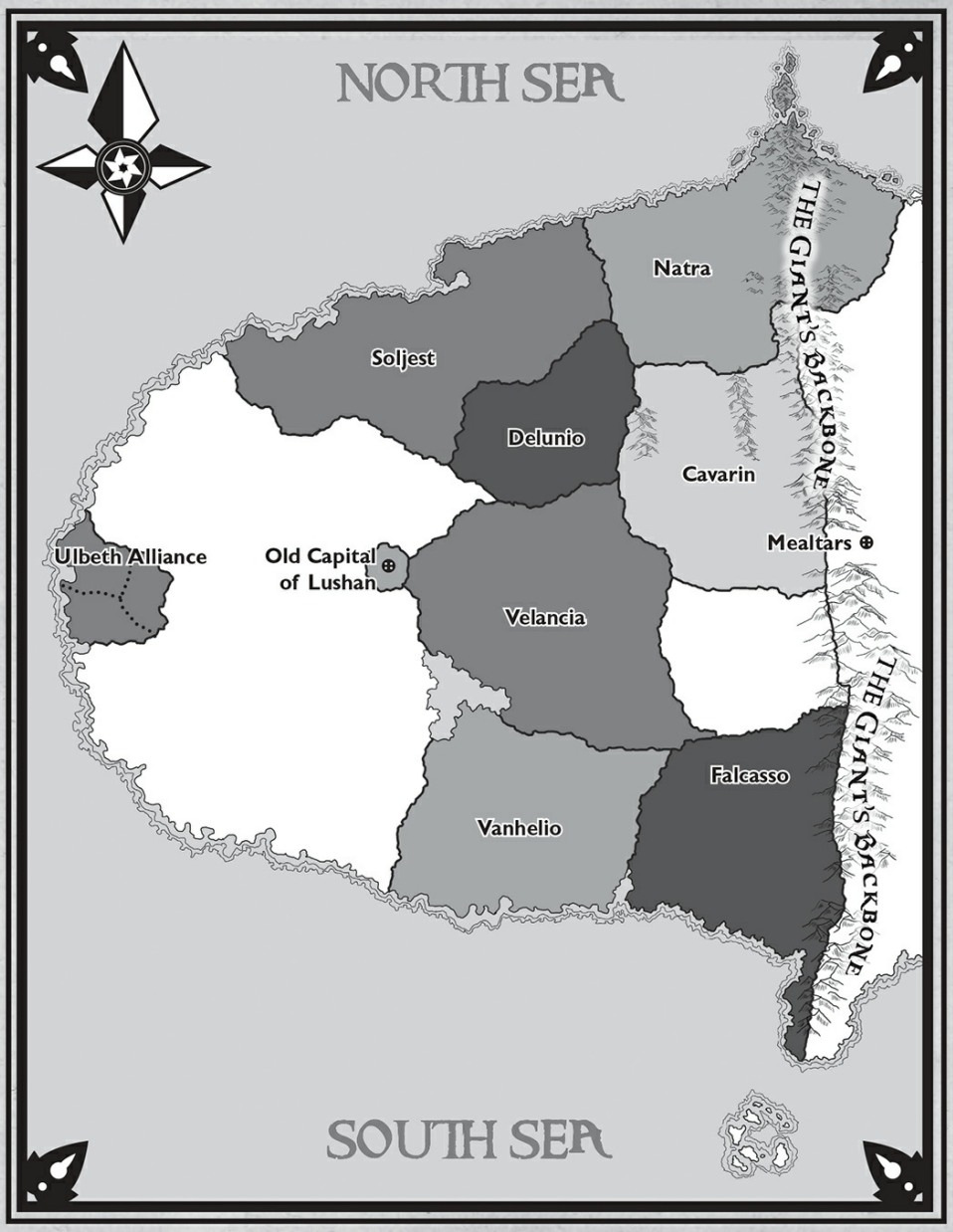

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WEIN

Prince regent of the continent's northernmost country, the Kingdom of Natra. A born genius who rescued his nation from many a disaster. Renowned as a benevolent leader, but is actually a self-indulgent slacker with everything except personality and looks.

FALANYA

Wein's little sister and the crown princess of Natra. Idolizes her brother and studies tirelessly in hopes of helping him.

NANAKI
Falanya's guard. A Flahm like Ninym.

GRUYERE
King of Soljest. Substantial in both body and talent. Known to be a fearsome opponent in battle.

MIROSLAV
Prince of Falcasso. Perceives the Empire and its rapid progress as a threat.

STEEL
Duke of Vanhelio. A peculiar character who is close to Caldmellia.

SKREI
King of Cavarin. Suppressed chaos that erupted after his father, the former king, passed. Has only recently inherited the crown.

NINYM

Wein's childhood friend and his Heart. Serves as his aide in the public and private sphere. Wishes Wein wouldn't be so reckless. Part of the Flahm, a group that's persecuted in the West.

LOWELLMINA

Second Imperial Princess of Earthworld Empire. Currently fighting the Imperial Princes for the throne. A bad influence on Wein and a worthy rival.

SIRGIS
The vassal appointed by Falanya. Formerly the prime minister of Delunio.

TIGRIS
Second prince of Velancia. An ambitious man aiming to be the next Holy King.

AGATA
Representative of the Ulbeth Alliance. Keeps his distance from the Teachings of Levetia despite being a Holy Elite.

SILVERIO
The Holy King. Rumored to be Caldmellia's puppet.

CALDMELLIA
Director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau. A dangerous figure with destructive tendencies.

Chapter 1 | Hey, How About *Another* International Conference?

Located on the northernmost tip of the Varno, the Kingdom of Natra was known for being a nation of immigrants. Snuggled on the border between East and West, its land didn't draw much attention to itself—except that it had terrible weather—but it quickly became a home for those without a place to stay, letting them quietly exist together…

A ray of fortune might be shining down on them now—largely because of Crown Prince Wein—but this didn't change the fact that most of the citizens were originally from elsewhere.

Of these various peoples, the Flahm were the most known, with their characteristic red eyes and white hair. Due to their appearance and history as a people, they were discriminated against in Western countries; even a supposed meritocracy like the Eastern Empire saw them as a cursed race.

That wasn't the case in Natra, however. About a hundred years earlier, Ralei, the leader of some nomadic Flahm, offered all his knowledge and skill to the King of Natra in exchange for the safety of his people. The king was eager to make this deal, but of course, he faced some backlash in the early days. After all, the will of a ruler wasn't always a reflection of the will of the people.

Nonetheless, neither the king nor the Flahm bent to the public, and they eventually achieved harmony with the entire population.

A century later, the Flahm lived in Natra as part of its social fabric. This was a hard-won victory, a great feat that started with Ralei and bore fruit through the efforts of many Flahm.

That was exactly why they could never afford to forget…that there was incalculable worth hidden in the seemingly mundane—

◆◇◆

“It’s our time!”

The scene opens in a room of a certain manor. Beyond the window, the night was chilly, the sky twinkling faintly with stars. It was autumn, winter nearing. Unlike the weather outside, however, the room inside was hot as the excitement of its occupants hung heavily in the air.

“Natra has grown at explosive rates under the leadership of the Prince. That said, we lack the manpower to support a growing nation, which means we’re experiencing shortages in every area. This is the perfect chance for us —the Flahm—to step up!”

Any outsiders would be shocked if they got a glimpse of this scene. After all, every attendee—from young men to elderly women—had flaming red eyes and white hair. This was a gathering of citizens who represented the Flahm in Natra.

“After a hundred years of living in obscurity, our time is finally here! We must work hard to improve our conditions in Natra and restore the pride of our people!” proclaimed the young man. His speech carried the same youthful energy his looks suggested.

It wasn’t just his peers who were listening intently to him.

“Yeah, if we can get our own people to patch over those openings, the Flahm will be more influential in Natra.”

“But we stand out just by existing. Non-Flahm will try to knock us down a few pegs if we make our motives too obvious.”

“Then we just gotta gain enough power to make them swallow their words. I bet we could do that now.”

“Right. With His Highness leading the nation, the value of Natra is on the rise. More people are applying for government jobs by the day. Any available positions will fill up in no time. We can’t just sit around twiddling our thumbs.”

The majority sided with the young man.

As the territory under Natra expanded, more people would be coming in from abroad. The problem was that most of them hated the Flahm. If the new settlers numbered in the single digits, they would have to obey Natra’s customs and assimilate. But if it was several dozen…or several hundred people? And if they were appointed to government positions? What would

happen then?

In the best case, they would keep their distance from the Flahm. It was more likely, however, that they would consider the Flahm—a race persecuted elsewhere—as an obstacle to overcome and attempt to get rid of them.

That was why the Flahm had to secure their own positions as Natra continued to grow. Everyone was more or less in agreement there.

There were, however, shadows who regarded them with cold eyes.

"—What do the two of you think?"

Called to join in on the conversation was a man of middle years and a young girl. His name was Levan. Hers, Ninym.

They were also Flahm, but the room treated them with noticeable deference. Levan was their leader and served as the aide of King Owen of Natra. Ninym currently served as Prince Wein's aid but would one day inherit Levan's position. In other words, one could say they were the two most influential Flahm in Natra.

"…I will not disagree that this is an opportunity," Levan stated. Everyone in the room turned to him. "However, we must not forget that the Flahm filled many empty positions after the insurrection and subsequent purge. People—a number that's not unsubstantial—were displeased by this decision. If we wish to expand further, we must do it with extreme care."

Levan's tone was solemn and calm. Under normal circumstances, he could cool everyone's heads to some extent, but—

"Master Levan, don't you think you are taking this matter a little too passively for someone of your standing?"

"I must agree. Many of the high-ranking positions granted to us after the purge are technically temporary. They can be stripped away at any time and for any reason."

"In fact, we would like for you to bring this matter to His Majesty's and His Highness's attention—to make our temporary positions official appointments."

Even Levan couldn't deescalate the fervor in the room. He groaned, and Ninym spoke up next to him.

"…There seems to be some sort of misunderstanding." Ninym's voice was much more youthful than Levan's but equally frigid. "As aides to the royal family, Master Levan and I are in high-ranking positions. Our duty, however, is to support them and help guide the nation…not favor our own

people."

Next to her, Levan looked visibly troubled, and the crowd began to stir.

"Lady Ninym! You can't be serious!"

"The future of the Flahm rests on your shoulders!"

"If you—the person closest to the prince—adopt that attitude, it'll set a poor example for everyone else!"

The representatives were in an uproar. Ninym answered them with an icy glare. Only Levan noticed her fist clenching tightly underneath the desk. This continued for some time until the dissenters eventually began to run out of steam.

"…Even after all that's been said—" called out a husky voice.

Everyone turned their attention toward an elderly woman who had been listening in silence until now. Although her age disqualified her from the front lines, her opinion held more weight than anyone else's present.

"Point me to our qualified individuals who can fill these important government positions." She glanced at those around her. Despite her years, the glint in her eyes held such power that it made them instinctively gulp. "I'm sure you've all realized that our most useful members are already employed in some way or another. If we squeeze incompetent persons into these positions, we will be taken advantage of by those who already hate us."

"Y-yes, Elder. That's true, but…"

"We might be able to find more people if we look closely among us. If all else fails, we can train any promising youth."

"And do you know any prospects?"

"……"

All the participants fell into an awkward silence. Levan didn't let this moment pass him by.

"Let's search for potential candidates before our next meeting. After all, we'll get nowhere without cards to play… Let's call it for today."

Levan's statement concluded the assembly.

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"…Well," Levan said with a grievous sigh after everyone had left the meeting room, "that went just about as I expected, but it still places us in a tough position…"

He crossed his arms in thought when he heard a loud *bam!*

Levan turned to find that Ninym was still in the room, and he watched her kick a chair nearby. She gave it another good kick and sent it flying.

"…Be graceful, Ninym."

Ignoring him, Ninym remained silent, indignation on her face. Levan let out another sigh. It was a difficult situation indeed.

"Are you that displeased by their opinion?"

"I am." Her words were clipped, her disapproval clear.

"…We may have found peace in Natra, but we will never shake the feeling that danger is around the corner as long as we continue to hear how Flahm are treated in other nations. I can understand why they want to be one step ahead," Levan reasoned. "No one is saying we should resort to force. We'll curry favor with people of influence as we've always done, fill important economic and political roles, gain power to protect our brethren, and—"

"*Form an independent kingdom of Flahm* if the opportunity arises?" Ninym asked, her words piercing like a spear. "The whole notion is ridiculous. We've lost our god and country and learned nothing from it."

"Ninym."

"I'm not naive enough to tell you to trust that others are acting with only good intentions. I know some people wish to expel us, and we must constantly prove our worth in Natra to thwart them. That said," Ninym spat, "don't tell me you didn't notice that their underlying motive is to use Natra in its time of crisis to create a nation of Flahm."

"……" Levan grimly closed his eyes. He didn't refute her. He was also aware there were some Flahm at the meeting who wanted this.

"It's an impossible dream, Ninym. Only a handful of people believe it's possible. The majority think it's nothing more than a fleeting idea that it would be nice."

"So we're ready to throw away peace—which might I remind you took us a hundred years to achieve—just for this short-lived consolation prize? Independence has a pleasant ring to those dissatisfied with the status quo. But what happens next? Will we announce to the rest of the continent that we're different from the others, satisfy our tiny egos, and enjoy our newfound glory? Oh, please. How can a race of people with no army, no funds, and no power go against an entire continent and hold their own nation together?"

Ninym barked. “We can keep dreaming, but you know we’ll be trampled by the other countries and races. Natra won’t be so tolerant anymore and might choose to throw stones at us. They’ll curse the Ashheads to go back to our own country—and we’ll be the punch line. What kind of cruel joke is that?”

Ninym glowered at Levan and continued.

“We look unique. Other people think we appear unnatural. For them to accept us in their hearts, we must continue to be good neighbors… You were the one who taught me that, Master Levan.”

“…You’re right. I did,” Levan answered with a vexed sigh.

Ninym was right. Impeccably so. He knew it, and he knew that was why Ninym, who could usually brush off such comments, was up in arms.

“But, Ninym, you should at least try and keep up appearances in front of everyone for now. You heard what they said at the meeting, didn’t you? You’re our future. For that reason alone, you—”

“The one I serve,” Ninym began, rage blazing in her eyes, “is neither our people nor their dreams. It is the crown prince of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest, and none other.”

She got to her feet.

“Ninym,” Levan called as she turned her back on him, but she never broke stride, eventually disappearing behind the door.

“…What am I supposed to do?” Levan stared up at the ceiling, sinking into his chair, all alone in the room.

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He felt a sudden presence by the doorway. He instinctively turned toward it and noticed a small human shadow.

—It was the old woman who had admonished everyone earlier in the meeting.

"You haven't returned home yet, Elder?"

"I took a short break. You can't fight against old age, you see…though I'd say you're more tired than me."

Levan shrugged. "I wish we could switch places."

"No, no, we can ask for no greater leader. I could never hope to fill your shoes."

"Tell me what you really think."

"I'm filled with joy, seeing a cheeky, snot-nosed brat becoming our leader and suffering because of it. I can't die yet. It's just begun."

"…Damn hag."

"Out of that mouth comes evil," rasped the old woman with a smile as she crossed the room to approach the window. "So how are things looking, Levan? Will we be able to pick up the pace?"

"It won't be easy. Despite what I told everyone, there don't seem to be any good candidates left. Unfortunately, Natra has expanded too fast."

"Will our dreams of independence go unfulfilled?"

"Yes—without a definitive plan for funds, material resources, or manpower. It won't take long until we all wake up and realize it was nothing more than a passing dream."

"Oh, how I hope that's how it ends."

The old woman continued to look out the window, and her eyes observed Ninym as the girl exited the building.

"…Levan, I assume you haven't told young ones about *that*, right?"

"Yes, I'm keeping that private. I considered mentioning it near the end of my tenure…but that was before. As they are now, it would only incite violence."

"Yes…" The old woman had on a mild expression. "…They can't know yet. They can't know that Ralei wanted something other than seeing the Flahm flourish. They can't know what Ralei and that group risked their lives to protect."

As she murmured to herself, the old woman gazed at the girl young enough to be her grandchild with an expression both affectionate and full of

respect.

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Falanya's tutor, Claudius, entered the library archive to find an unexpected guest.

"Your Highness, what are you doing here?"

"Hmm? …Oh, Claudius."

Silhouetted against the orderly bookshelves and faint rays of light filtering through the window was a young man with a book in hand. The crown prince of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest.

"Isn't there only one reason why anyone ever comes in here?" Wein asked with a small smile, balancing his book in his hand.

So he had come to the library to read. It was obvious now that he mentioned it. That said, it was strange for someone in Wein's position.

"I'm certain an official would have delivered the desired book to your office if you had asked."

"Don't say that. Going to the library to find your own book comes with its own pleasures."

"…I see. I can understand that."

In Claudius's younger days, his heart used to dance whenever he headed to the library of the city he once called home.

"Anyway, Claudius, you're here for a book, too, right?"

"Yes. I am searching for a book to use during my lessons with Princess Falanya."

"Oh yeah? I heard that Falanya has been hitting the books lately. What're you studying now?"

"The history of the Western continent," Claudius replied. Now was as good a time as any for him to have this discussion with Wein. "…We'll also be touching on the nation of Flahm in the near future."

"Oh, that…" Wein gave an uneasy groan.

There once was the proud and prosperous kingdom of the Flahm in the West. Not many in this town, however, knew about its rise and fall. Remaining records had been kept by the royal families of Western nations or by the Flahm themselves. The most detailed accounts belonged to the former and the royal family of Natra, to whom the Flahm had entrusted their records.

"What do you advise? According to tradition, these events should be taught by a royal family member of the same bloodline."

Wein mulled this over for a few seconds. "…This should be my father's role, but I'll do it."

"In that case, I shall inform you when the time comes," Claudius replied with a reverent bow.

The tutor continued to speak with Wein about inconsequential matters as he gathered the necessary materials for Falanya's lessons. Most other government officials would not dare to engage in casual conversation with the prince; they would prostate themselves before him—as he was now steering Natra. Claudius, on the other hand, knew Wein enjoyed this kind of thing with his vassals.

Not just the prince, but the entire family does.

Internal unity was paramount for a small country like Natra. After all, they'd be blown away in an instant if they failed to unite when a foreign threat came calling. This was why each generation of the royal family loved to meet as many people as possible. They knew that direct communication and mutual understanding were the best way to build that bond.

They can appraise the type of person they're dealing with and charm them with their personality… I suppose it would be offensive to compare them to swindlers.

Well, Wein would have laughed at this and taken it in stride. Barring a few exceptions and as long as you were acting with some level of courtesy, the young prince would forgive just about anything with a smile.

And that courtesy is only for the benefit of everyone else. His Highness couldn't care less about his own position and authority. Even among the royal family, that's an exception.

Claudius used to be Wein's childhood tutor, and the boy had been outstanding even then. He was obviously brilliant, and his thought processes, value systems, and perceptiveness were peculiar, too. Wein had left Claudius shaken more than once or twice.

...Even with that incident with Sirgis. I wonder what His Highness was thinking when he accepted Princess Falanya's vassal.

Sirgis was the former prime minister of Delunio. Wein's schemes caused him to fall from power and be chased from his homeland. Several days prior, he arrived in Natra by Princess Falanya's own invitation. Soon after their

meeting, Sirgis became her vassal.

This development had sent the Imperial court in a spiral. Everyone was aware that Princess Falanya had been devoting herself to her studies so she could help her brother. Her only attendants before this had been several handmaidens and Nanaki, a Flahm. That was what spurred her to secretly choose someone to aide her in political matters… In any event, the sudden appearance of a foreign ex–prime minister was bound to create chaos.

Claudius had been just as shocked. He was the one who told Falanya about the location of the retired prime minister, but even he never could have imagined she'd convince him to serve under her. He was impressed to discover that royal blood was as strong in her as it was in Wein.

That said, Claudius couldn't just do nothing in his state of astonishment. Even if Falanya wasn't yet at Wein's level, she was steadily passing milestones on her own. *And* she had appointed someone with a personal vendetta against Wein. Several vassals were already starting to worry about her growing circle—which would undoubtedly lead to a faction war.

Based on the way they saw it, the sooner Wein criticized Sirgis's appointment, the better. It was well known that the siblings were close, so they had assumed Falanya would have no choice but to comply if her brother tried to stop her.

But Prince Wein hasn't attempted to stop her. Some believe this is because their relationship is so strong that he can't bring himself to scold his little sister, but…

Was the prince so soft that his love for his sister would prevent him from going against her? Wasn't he a prince as cold as ice, despite his gentle disposition?

That was why Claudius knew Wein was confident that he could manage the growth of Falanya's faction and Sirgis's crafty schemes. And Claudius would bet that Wein's true intentions would be indecipherable to the common man.

"……"

The window suddenly went dark. Wein's features were obscured in shadow. It was like looking into the abyss.

"What's wrong, Claudius?"

"…Nothing. Please pardon me. It seems I'm tired." Claudius shook his head. It was over in an instant. In the blink of an eye, Wein's expression was

gentle once again.

"Falanya and I will be heading out as foreign ambassadors pretty soon. Take care of yourself so she doesn't have to worry about you."

"Of course… Will you both be attending the Gathering of the Chosen?"

"I'll be at the Gathering, but Falanya is going to a meeting with some major leaders that'll be happening at the same time."

The Gathering of the Chosen. A conference hosted by Levetia, the religion that dominated the Western continent. Leaders known as the "Holy Elite" came together to discuss various matters concerning the religion. It was customarily held each spring, but owing to some scheduling difficulties, it had been postponed to the end of fall.

"I didn't have the opportunity to talk to all the Holy Elites when I attended the last time, so this is my chance. I've talked about strategy with the vassals, and I have to admit it's tempting to foster relations with the West."

Claudius nodded in agreement. For the past several years, Natra had been progressing at accelerated speeds, and being sandwiched between the Eastern Empire and all the nations to the west meant they couldn't sever ties with either side—at least not yet.

"At any rate, do try to avoid the same kind of trouble you encountered last time."

"Gah." Wein looked a little ashamed, acting his age for once.

The neighboring nation of Cavarin had invited him to the last Gathering, and after a series of twists and turns, Wein ended up fleeing their capital and going against their army. He'd had his reasons, but there was no question his actions had been less than exemplary.

"D-don't worry about it. It'll be smooth sailing," Wein said with a forced smile.

"I would like to believe so. However, the truth is that we've hardly had a moment's peace since you became regent, Your Highness."

"……"

Claudius was right; trouble seemed to always be just around the corner. Wein paused for a while before speaking with newfound resolve.

"If it looks like this trip takes a wrong turn, I'll run to the church and pray."

"…Right."

In the third autumn since Prince Wein of Natra had been appointed regent, he set off with Princess Falanya to attend the Gathering of the Chosen for the second time. Some historical records claim the prince stopped by a church on his way back and doused himself in holy water, but the veracity of this remains unclear.

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The Imperial Capital of Grantsrale in the Earthworld Empire.

One girl sat in a room of the Imperial Palace. Lowellmina Earthworld, the youngest Imperial Princess of the Earthworld Empire.

News had made its way across the continent about how Imperial Prince Demetrio had recently tried to ascend the throne for himself, which ended up catching the middle prince, youngest prince, and Lowellmina in a domestic conflict. Amid this turmoil, it was, in fact, Lowellmina who had emerged victorious. She pushed aside the armies of the middle and youngest princes, and the eldest brother fell from power just as the throne was within reach. Then, by undergoing the required ceremony, she announced her legitimacy as the future Empress.

Lowellmina was a modern heroine. Although she hadn't yet risen to the throne, which could trigger a revolt, it was no exaggeration to say the eyes of the entire continent were on her every move.

As for what sort of task a figure universally described as "legendary" was undertaking at the Imperial Palace…

"I'm going to power puke…" She faced a mountain of paperwork with a deadpan expression.

"Your Highness, please don't cut too loose when you're out of the public eye," her subordinate, Fyshe, advised next to her.

Imperial Princess Lowellmina's constant groaning as she slumped over a desk of unprocessed paperwork didn't exactly scream "dignified."

"You think I'm taking it easy?! I'm giving you all I have to offer! And all I can offer is this pukey feeling!"

"Please choose your words with more care."

"Violently pukey!"

“Your Highness…” Fyshe flashed her a despondent look, and Lowellmina pouted childishly.

“Can you blame me?! I haven’t had a moment to rest since I made the announcement!”

“I understand, but…”

Lowellmina was the former leader of the Patriot Faction, which was known for lamenting their concern over the future of the Empire. On top of that, she had defeated her three older brothers and boosted the numbers of the Patriot Faction by absorbing the eldest brother Demetrio’s followers once he fell from power. The factions of the two remaining brothers also weakened upon losing the war, and their unification was steadily deteriorating. In the eyes of society, the odds were clearly in Lowellmina’s favor.

—However…

“Our faction might fall apart. I’m soooo screwed…”

As it turned out, Lowellmina *was* in a tight spot.

To start, the Patriot Faction had always been scared that the battle for the throne might destabilize the Empire, which was why they had banded together in the first place. And now, their representative, Lowellmina, had announced that she would join the fight without any warning—even if it was the eldest prince’s doing. Many of the people in the faction were like, “Hold up, this wasn’t the agreement.” And could you blame them for having that reaction?

In addition, Demetrio’s faction wasn’t actually loyal to Lowellmina. They had only half-heartedly joined her on account of the eldest prince’s insistence. Plus, it would have been awkward to join the other brothers’ factions, since they’d recently crossed swords with them, and these two groups were also on the decline anyway. If they were being honest, more than a few were waiting to crush the princess who had caused Demetrio’s downfall as soon as she slipped up.

As the icing on the cake, opportunists were banding under her, too. Like the eldest prince’s faction, they felt no loyalty toward Lowellmina. This itself was not much cause for alarm. The issue was that most of them were angling to be Lowellmina’s husband. The value of snagging a beautiful bachelorette who might be next in line for the throne was priceless. With this role on the line, a battle—an intense one—had broken out within the faction.

As if the tension wasn’t already bad enough, Lowellmina couldn’t stand

being treated as a prize in their bro fight. This was the source of her constant groaning.

"In the end, I'm being underestimated once again."

The Patriot Faction thought she was contributing to violence in the Empire.

The eldest prince's faction looked down on her for defeating their leader through what seemed like sheer luck.

The guys aiming for her hand in marriage undermined her and didn't believe for two seconds that a woman could rule the Empire.

She had to do something. She had to prove to everyone in her faction that the person named Lowellmina was worth serving.

Except she still didn't have the slightest clue how to go about that.

"I'm going to power puke…"

This was the only conclusion she'd arrived at.

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The middle and youngest princes were busy scrambling to gather their forces because they'd lost. Lowellmina was attempting the same thing because she'd won. Victory or defeat, the outcome seemed to be the same, oddly enough.

"Fyshe, tell me something funny," Lowellmina said out of desperation.

Fyshe looked sullen. "Unfortunately, as someone who is glued to your side, everything that I've experienced, you've experienced."

"I don't need you to be all logical! Tell me a funny story to lift my spirits! Make something up if you have to!"

"…Very well. I have a rather comedic tale about an attendant who became so delirious after many nights of accompanying her *very* busy master that she got lost on her way home."

"…I'll give you a day off sometime, so let's pretend that never happened! Okay?!"

"Hmm? There's no need to act so flustered. It's just a story made it up on the spot." There was a terrifying quality to Fyshe's grin.

Lowellmina internally vowed never to broach the matter again.

"Ah, I wouldn't call it a 'funny' story, but the object of your obsessions, Prince Wein, will be attending the Gathering of the Chosen."

"Oh, is it that time already?"

At present, people considered the Kingdom of Natra an ally of the Empire and part of Lowellmina's faction. This, however, was just the public opinion. The relationship between Natra and the Empire—the relationship between Wein and Lowellmina—was in a precarious state, teetering by the slightest change in conditions.

This Gathering of the Chosen was the same way. The prince insisted he'd ensure the Western nations wouldn't encroach on the Empire, but this was Wein. He had to be plotting to form some kind of relations with them.

Fyshe looked troubled. "Is there a chance Natra will side with the West?"

"It's possible, but I don't think it's very realistic for them to sever ties with the Empire. Unless something drastic happens, he'll want to maintain our current relationship."

"But that may not agree with what the West wants."

"Precisely." Lowellmina smiled. "Show me how you'll fight against these Western monsters, Wein."

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It was a dream, almost suffocating, one that led her through a dark swamp. The mud bonding to her feet grew heavier with every step. She kept treading forward—through the pain, through the suffering, through the urge to cry. She pressed on, even as the sludge dragged her down.

What lay up ahead? That was anyone's guess—

"———Ngh." Ninym's eyes snapped open.

Shoot! she cursed, instantly regretful.

She was inside a carriage. Wein was heading to the Gathering of the Chosen, and Ninym was selected to accompany him as part of the delegation. Hair dyed black, she was in the same carriage as Wein as both his servant and his guard—but she'd inadvertently fallen asleep.

At fault were the sunlight pouring through the windows and the gentle rocking of the carriage. At any rate, she was a disgrace to guards everywhere for displaying this moment of weakness, for falling asleep in front of her master.

"Your—"

Your Highness. Ninym was about to call out to him, but the words caught in her throat. Her crimson eyes watched Wein doze with his chin in his hand, arm propped up against the window frame.

...Wein fell asleep, too.

Ninym looked at his peaceful expression and sighed, experiencing some respite from the crushing weight of her dream earlier. She continued to gaze up at him. Time passed quietly, the carriage lightly rocking.

…Ninym stood without a word and cautiously glanced to her sides. Wein didn't stir. Even the guards surrounding them on horseback weren't paying attention to the occupants inside. —In other words, Ninym could do whatever she pleased here, and no one would know.

...Gently now. Gently.

Ninym knelt next to Wein. Her earlier dream was to blame for this. She felt compelled to indulge herself—just a little. She rested her head on Wein's chest and nuzzled her cheek against him like a puppy snuggling with its

master.

"Mm…" Wein mumbled softly, and Ninym stiffened. He gave no other indication, however, that he was awake. Relieved, she rubbed her cheek against him twice…and then a third time.

As she did, Wein's hand sleepily moved to stroke Ninym's head. He wasn't awake; this was pure habit. Whenever his consciousness was hazy, Wein—a man often busy pampering Falanya—often mistook anyone who put their head against his chest for his little sister.

Unfortunately, he was still in dreamland, so he would sometimes stop moving as if he were a marionette with cut strings. Fortunately, it took only a bit of prodding to get him to start again. In all of Natra, only Ninym and Falanya knew about this little secret.

"*Haaah…*" Ninym felt herself break into an easy smile. These secret moments were impossible when Wein was awake or when they were in the public eye.

He'll wake up if I keep pressing my luck, but maybe if it's just a little longer…

Wein's fingers combed through her dyed hair. As she basked in the sensation and continued to tell herself that it would be one more minute—

Ka-thunk! The carriage lurched.

"Nnghh, *yaaaawn*—" Wein groaned. His consciousness settled in his mind, and his eyes opened. Through his blurry vision, he saw…Ninym sitting across from him.

"Oh, Ninym. You're awake?"

"—Yes, I just woke up." As she steadied her panicked, ragged breath, Ninym flashed him a smile. She had moved with such speed that even Wein failed to catch her in that instant between sleep and consciousness.

"Hey, Ninym, was Falanya just here?"

"What? She's in a different carriage. You know that."

"Oh, right… Was I dreaming? But that was so…"

"A-anyway, Wein! Now that you're awake, let's review our strategy!"

"S-sure. What's gotten into you? But I guess you have a point." Wein was confused by her behavior, but he went with the flow and switched gears. "Not sure if you can call it a 'strategy,' really. We'll meet the Holy Elites in Lushan—and rip a hole in their trap, which I know is there, one hundred percent."

The old capital of Lushan. Holy ground for devotees of Levetia and the current forum for the Gathering of the Chosen.

"Do you really think they're up to something?"

"Definitely. They wouldn't invite me to their little Gathering on a whim or from momentary madness."

Only Holy Elites could attend the Gathering of the Chosen, technically. During the same conference in the capital of Cavarin, Wein was just invited to a private audience with the king of the nation that took place at the same time, not to the meeting itself.

"I probably wouldn't have been so suspicious if they'd come up with another excuse…but there's no question that this invite is for the Gathering of the Chosen. The letter was in Holy King Silverio's own hand."

The Holy King. A man chosen by the Holy Elites. The head of Levetia. Silverio currently held the position—and he was rumored to have a close relationship with the director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau, Caldmellia.

"Which means Director Caldmellia probably had a say in the matter."

"And if we're dealing with that witch, you *know* she isn't just being nice."

Ninym sighed. "We can't get out of this with some excuse…which really sucks."

"Considering everything, we'd be pretty dumb to think they'd just leave Natra alone."

The Kingdom of Natra, nestled between the Eastern and Western continents, was a buffer zone. As regent, Wein had developed a foreign policy to play the opportunist and cater to both sides. It had worked well when it was a poor nation—the other countries were confident that they could put Natra back in its place if push came to shove. That was how the country had been able to skirt danger while maintaining friendly relations with everyone for so long.

Now, Natra had grown exponentially. This doubling in size made them a legitimate power in the eyes of the rest of the continent. Their presence put pressure on top military leaders in the East and the West, forcing them to reconsider what would happen if Natra ever decided to set its sights on them.

If one took a quick glance at Wein's career since rising to power—that is, his constant warring against Western nations—it was natural to conclude that the situation was leaning favorably to the East.

"There's an unmistakable threat in this invite. It's basically saying, 'If you

want to side with the West…and Levetia, then you'd better show up.' If we turned it down, I bet they would label us heretics."

If that happened, it would make Natra an enemy of the West. Wein wanted to avoid this outcome, which meant he had no other choice but to attend. Despite his obvious favoritism of the East, the West continued to be gracious. That alone told him they weren't yet ready to cast Wein and Natra aside.

"In that case, I would assume the West is planning to either ally with Natra…or force us to cut our ties with the Empire."

"It's possible."

Princess Tolcheila of the Soljest Kingdom had once told him that Natra's days of sitting on the fence were over. She was right. The Western nations were going to make sure of that.

"So what will you do, Wein?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Wein answered with a smile. "I'm gonna keep things vague!"

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"…is what I imagine His Regency is saying."

Behind Wein and Ninym's carriage, a second stagecoach with the same appearance rolled forward. There were three people inside—Princess Falanya, her guard Nanaki, and Falanya's recently appointed vassal, Sirgis.

"So he's planning to play both sides for as long as he can."

Sirgis had just finished explaining Wein's strategy to Falanya. She intended to confirm the truth on her own with Wein at a later date, but she had gotten Sirgis to explain this to her, so she wouldn't take up too much of her brother's busy schedule trying to decipher his plans. It also helped the princess measure the abilities of her new vassal.

"Geographically speaking, if a full-scale war broke out between the East and the West, Natra would become the front line. Whomever we side with, that will not change. If this happened, Natra would be crushed in an instant despite its impressive growth."

"Hmm," Falanya groaned. "So Natra has made significant progress, but there's still room for improvement."

"On the contrary. I believe this expansion has brought us trouble," Sirgis

replied politely. “Other nations see Natra as a significant threat. As it stands, if we decide to stop dithering, it will incite the Eastern and the Western countries to take drastic measures. In short, the very act of Natra announcing their preferred alliance may spur both sides to engage in war.”

“Being a tiny nation was difficult enough, but to think prosperity would bring us just as much trouble. It’s not fair…”

Falanya let out a weary, involuntary sigh. It was clear that her brother wasn’t currying favor by choice. He was maintaining a very delicate balance for the sake of Natra and its survival.

I’m sure it’s not so simple. Even Wein is only human. He must be suffering and voicing his complaints where no one can see…

This was no laughing matter. It wouldn’t surprise her if her brother’s heart was tormented by the thought that the future of Natra was on the line.

I have to come into my own as fast as possible so I can help him.

As Wein occupied her thoughts, Falanya cemented her dedication to the cause.

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“Keh-keh-keh, you must think you’re so sneaky, calling me over there so you can corner me in front of the Holy Elites. But don’t you even *think* of trying me, Caldmellia. I’ll make sure this Gathering of the Chosen is the most draining, pointless, and unproductive meeting of all time…!”

“……”

“Hmm? What’s up, Ninym?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking it must be hard being such a huge wimp.”

Wein blinked at her. What in the world could she possibly be talking about?

“—Your Highness, the city has come into view,” the carriage driver called out.

The two opened the window and looked outside. The outline of a city was before them. The old capital of Lushan, where the Gathering of the Chosen was to be held—

But the city outside wasn’t Lushan.

Their destination was still several days away. This was one of the transit points that led to it. There wasn’t much in terms of sightseeing and no real

point in stopping outside of rest and resupplies. Wein, however, had business there.

"All righty. How about a messy prebattle skirmish?" Wein asked with an invincible smile.

Then—

"—I've been waiting for you, Prince Wein."

The king of Soljest, Gruyere, smiled ferociously at Wein, having arrived at the city earlier.

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King Gruyere was the one to propose this get-together.

He was hoping to conduct a secret meeting before their arrival in Lushan.

Wein had agreed to Gruyere's suggestion without a second thought. The Gathering of the Chosen was just ahead, and he was entering the lair of the West's most dangerous mortals, those at the pinnacle of the West. One could not simply walk in and have things go their way without a single card in hand, so when Wein was offered the opportunity to earn one in negotiations beforehand, hopping on board was a no-brainer.

Of course, his negotiation partner was King Gruyere—one of those high-profile devils. The two had gone to war with each other in the past. Wein just barely managed to eke out a victory, and the two countries had established friendly relations afterward, but it wouldn't be any surprise if Gruyere secretly harbored less than cordial feelings. Wein had to approach this with caution.

"—I can't say I was expecting *this*," Wein mumbled in exasperation.

The reason for his annoyance was right before his eyes. The giant was heartily eating from a lineup of dishes on the table in front of him.

"What's the matter, Prince Wein? Why, you've hardly touched your food," Gruyere commented, promptly downing the wine in his custom glass, which was three sizes larger than normal—yet somehow tiny in his hand. "Not feeling well? Or did the fare not suit your palate? In that case, I can have food from Natra prepared."

“Please do not fret, King Gruyere. I’m in good health, and the food is excellent. That said—” Wein began with a wry smile, “I am a bit surprised. It appears that your body has regained its original form.”

“Oh, this?” Gruyere replied, slapping his potbelly.

Gossips once whispered that Gruyere was as corpulent as a pig, but he had slimmed down to the point of being unrecognizable, in part attributed to the stress of losing to Natra. Now that they had reunited, however, it was evident he was back to his massive self.

“Getting this back took a lot of effort. Maybe it’s because my stomach got smaller; I dined like a bird. Look, I’ve only eaten five plates.”

“My, what a display of self-control.”

“Right? People might mistake me for the most pious of devotees under Levetia.”

“It would be no mistake. If I were to rip open your stomach, I believe it would overflow not with fat, but the miracles of God.”

“Ohh! In that case, I suppose my meals are offerings to the divine. I can’t just sit here whining about a small appetite!”

Gruyere gave a hearty laugh as he gobbled up two more servings and was polishing off a third. He didn’t show the slightest hint of animosity toward Wein. In fact, one could only say he was in the best of moods. Their ages were far enough apart to be parent and child, yet there was camaraderie between the two. From an outside perspective, any concern that their relationship might sour would be deemed completely baseless.

—Well, there’s as good a chance as any, Wein thought. While Gruyere appeared to be all smiles, he was probably cold as an empty wasteland at night on the inside.

Wein wasn’t being especially the passive type, and neither was Gruyere. Even if his jubilance was authentic, the king had to be chatting with Wein and simultaneously plotting his and Natra’s downfall. Politicians were incorrigible creatures, you see.

“So, King Gruyere. Shall we get to the heart of the matter? I take it you did not call me here to catch up?”

“I wouldn’t mind some idle gossip if I’m being honest. Talking with a young man with gifts like yourself is exhilarating… Oh, don’t glare at me. I do have an actual reason,” Gruyere replied as Wein shot him a sharp look. “Do you know what sort of discussion will take place at this Gathering of the

Chosen?"

"There will be talk of how to deal with Natra, I presume."

"Indeed. But that's far from the only topic on the agenda. There is also the situation with the Empire, Levetia's recent expansion into the East, revisions to our current creed, and much more. In addition, they've invited one more outsider besides you."

"This is news to me."

At present, there were six total members of the Holy Elite if one included the Holy King.

The king of Soljest Kingdom, Gruyere.

The brother of the king of Velancia Kingdom, Tigris.

The prince of Falcasso Kingdom, Miroslav.

The duke of Vanhelio Kingdom, Steel.

The representative of the Ulbeth Alliance, Agata.

And the Holy King who governed over the Holy Elites, Silverio.

These six were the current Holy Elites, and each had the proper qualifications to match. Aside from Wein, the one other person likely to join this conference was—

"Could it be…the new ruler of Cavarin, King Skrei?"

"Ah, so you know of him."

The Kingdom of Cavarin was located south of Natra. The previous king, Ordalasse, was a Holy Elite and was unfortunately assassinated by a general in his own army, Levert. The general attempted to place the blame for the assassination on Natra, but tragically, history has recorded Levert as beaten by his own game.

Losing both their king and their general left the people—nobles and commoners alike—concerned about their future, pressures mounting. The nation was rocked off its foundation, but the matter had finally been settled in recent days. After a number of political twists and turns, Ordalasse's son, Skrei, received the lion's share of support.

The situation in Cavarin is still ongoing, however, and Skrei hasn't secured his position. I'm sure he's looking for a strong foothold right about now.

That was Skrei and Cavarin's line of thinking. And another organization was on the same page…

Cavarin faces the central merchant city of Mealtars. In other words, it's a

strategic entry point for the West. Even Levetia wants to have some power there.

It was Levetia. As for what might happen if the two got together—

"It's exactly what you think. The agenda for this Gathering will include King Skrei's admission into the Holy Elites. If all goes to plan, he'll be welcomed in."

"How very fortuitous."

With the power of a Holy Elite, Skrei could exercise his authority over his unstable nation. And if Levetia made Skrei a Holy Elite, they would gain influence in Cavarin and the ability to strong-arm the East.

"The introduction of a new Holy Elite would revitalize the West. At this rate, it seems that the discussion of Natra will end as a tiny footnote."

"A surprising comment, coming from you," Gruyere said with a bemused sniff. "Wouldn't hiding in Skrei's shadow without anyone even touching on the topic of Natra be the best thing to happen for you?"

Anyone with eyes could tell that Natra was toeing the line between East and West. And naturally, Wein wouldn't admit a word of this.

"You misunderstand, King Gruyere. I wish to take this opportunity to be accepted among the Western nations. I would love to contribute to Levetia."

"Ha. Sludge would pour out of that stomach if I cut it open," Gruyere answered with a grin. "Anyway, that brings us to the topic at hand. The truth is, Prince Wein, a certain someone asked me to meet with you today."

"What…?" Wein frowned, and a knock came at the door as if in response.

"Come in." Gruyere beckoned in the visitor before Wein could even ask for a name, and the door opened.

"We've met once already, but it looks like this is our first official introduction, Prince Wein."

A man appeared before them. He was a full decade or so older than Wein, and his robust presence indicated he was in the prime of life. One could also tell by his energized demeanor and physique that he was no ordinary person.

Tigris gave a civil bow as Wein stared at him sharply.

"I'm Tigris of Velancia… How about conspiring with me?" the Holy Elite Tigris suggested with a grin.

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“I wonder if my brother is okay…”

Falanya waited in another room of the building while Wein continued his discussion with the others.

“There is no need to worry. I’m certain Prince Wein will return to us in one piece.”

Ninym smiled gently next to her. She normally would have accompanied Wein, but unfortunately, they were in Western territory. Even a Flahm with dyed hair would be met with unnecessary trouble if she stood out too much, so Ninym stayed back with Falanya.

“I have total faith in Wein, of course. But I’m getting a little antsy. Don’t you feel the same way, Ninym?”

“Well, yes…”

Although he had guards with him, Ninym always felt off when she wasn’t with Wein herself. In a way, watching over Falanya was a form of distraction.

As the two fidgeted next to each other, Nanaki stood guard from the shadows. *What are they doing out there?* he thought as the door swung open.

“Pardon all!”

A plucky voice heralded the appearance of a young girl. Falanya recognized the intelligent-looking face with chestnut hair.

“…Oh, you’re here, too, Princess Tolcheila.”

Princess Tolcheila of Soljest. She was King Gruyere’s beloved daughter and a character Falanya wasn’t all too sure how to deal with.

“Aye. Top leaders from every nation are meeting in Lushan during the Gathering of the Chosen, so Father suggested I introduce myself.”

Tolcheila plopped down across from Falanya with a buoyant smile. Although sent to Natra under the pretext of studying abroad, the girl was essentially a hostage in Natra. Tolcheila, nevertheless, continued to run around freely and do her own thing. She even visited her homeland on occasion. She must have recently gone back to join King Gruyere’s delegation.

“I take it you’re here for similar reasons, Princess Falanya?”

“Yes. After all, my brother is busy with the Gathering of the Chosen.”

“Well then, shall we compete to see which of us can curry the most favor with the most important members here?”

“…I won’t do such a thing. This isn’t a game.”

“No confidence? Well, with a body like mine, I can certainly understand why you might turn tail.”

“I am not turning tail! Besides, we have almost the same figure!”

“It appears you’re clueless. There is a difference between being scrawny and unripened.”

Tolcheila roared with laughter, and across from her, Falanya’s expression soured. Maybe it was their differing viewpoints or personalities. Maybe it was shared history from a previous life. At any rate, Falanya couldn’t see eye to eye with Tolcheila at all.

“Come to think of it, isn’t Prime Minister Sirgis serving you now?” Tolcheila asked. “I heard he disappeared after Delunio banished him, and no other country would openly accept him, but to think he’d end up working for the little sister of the man who brought about his downfall. Tell me, what tricks did you use to pull him in?”

“I persuaded him through heartfelt sincerity.”

“Sincerity, you say?” Tolcheila repeated, her lips curling. “Don’t you wonder whether *he* is being sincere? Couldn’t he use you to assassinate Prince Wein in his sleep? For any ex–prime minister, tricking a little girl is child’s play.”

Her tone was scornful.

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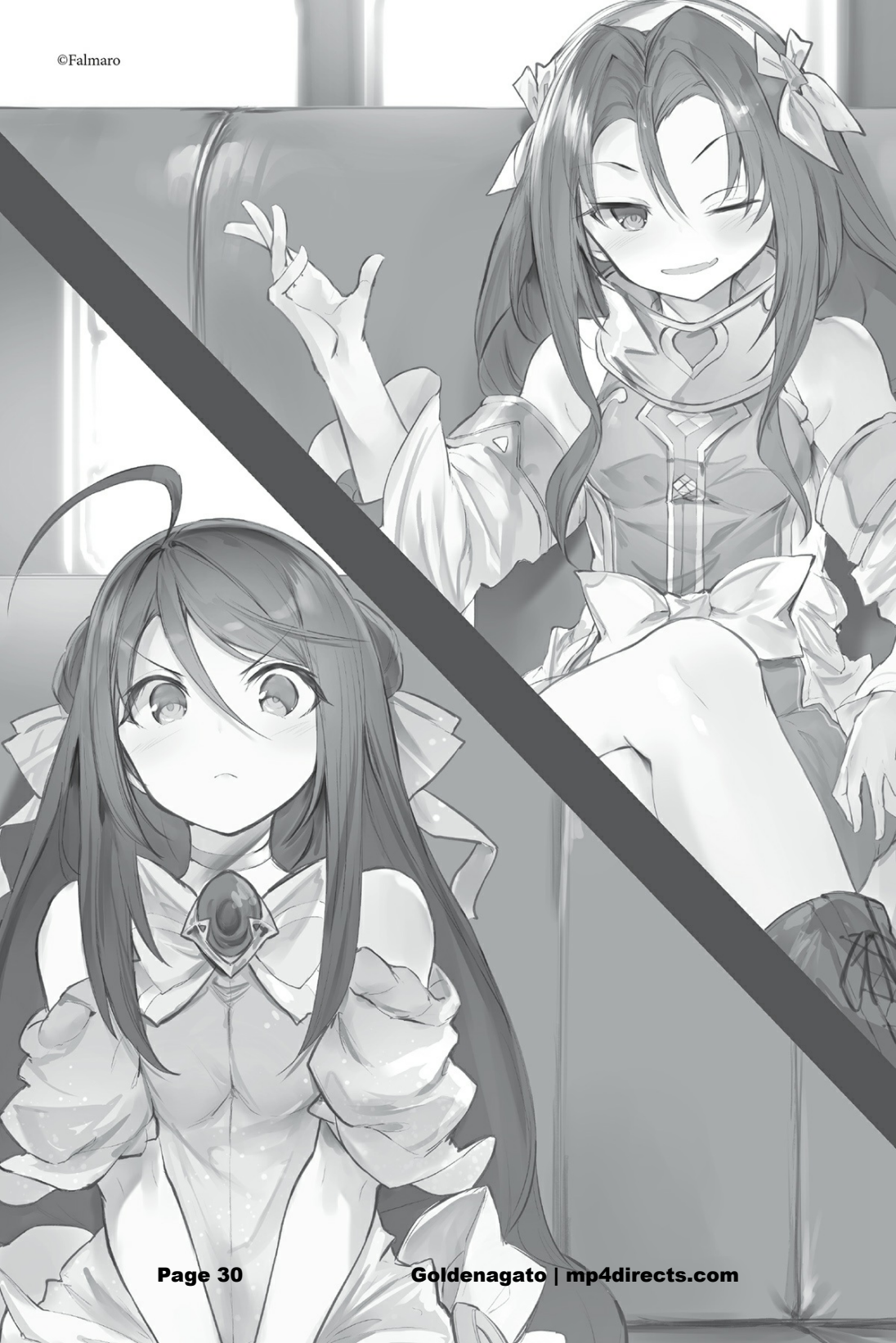

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You're in over your head. How careless, she seemed to deride between her spoken words.

If this had been half a year earlier, Falanya would have grown testy and objected to such accusations. But on this very day and in this moment, her response was different.

"—I appointed him fully aware of the danger."

After all, Falanya had steeled herself on the matter, determined to follow through with it.

"My brother continues to surpass his trials and press onward. I have to catch up to him. That's why I can't afford to stay on the safest or most reliable path. If I don't seek out more challenging situations, I'll never reach more challenging places."

"Hmph…"

Tolcheila was slightly daunted by the fluidity of Falanya's answer. However, this lasted only a brief instant before she broke into her usual confident smile.

"Very well, then. In that case, do try not to take a tumble. Pitfalls often magically appear when and where you least expect them. Your dear brother, the object of your admiration, should be realizing that right about now."

"…What do you mean?"

"Who knows? Well, I'm sure you'll understand when he gets back."

Tolcheila's cheerful grin made unspeakable anxiety spike up inside Falanya.

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"…What's going on here, Gruyere?"

The Holy Elite Tigris.

Now faced with the unexpected appearance of a major player—one whom he was planning to meet at the Gathering—Wein looked not at him but at Gruyere.

"I thought this was supposed to be just the two of us, Gruyere."

Wein's civility had vanished, and he didn't hold back his grievances. Naturally. Inviting unrelated persons to a meeting without prior notice was basically an ambush. At this rate, Gruyere had no grounds to complain if Wein backed out.

“Sorry, Tigris asked me to keep quiet,” Gruyere replied, but Wein wasn’t convinced.

“You could have mentioned it earlier.”

“It’s my fault, Prince Wein,” Tigris cut in. “In all official capacities, I am currently at a different transit point. To keep my location secret, I had to conceal information even from you.”

“There you have it. I admit we weren’t exactly transparent, but we ask you not to leave just yet.”

“…You owe me one, Gruyere,” Wein grumbled, body language indicating his reluctance.

Well, I suppose we’re on the same page, he thought.

Contrary to his external attitude, Wein was perfectly calm. In fact, he wasn’t mad at all, though he had to admit he was shocked. He considered Tigris’s appearance as an excellent opportunity.

That being said, Gruyere did him a favor by acting out of line. Now, Wein could wring something out of him by amping up the theatrics and acting thoroughly dissatisfied. There was a part of him that wanted to pretend to walk out to see if his opponent would try and stop him.

Gruyere said he’d been asked to arrange this meeting. And he didn’t put up a fight to admit fault or resist owing a favor to Natra… That means Tigris must be offering him something—money or otherwise.

At the same time, it served to show that Tigris was serious about this—that he wanted to meet Wein in secret using these means.

The Holy Elite Tigris…

The younger brother of the current king of Velancia and a Holy Elite. His back story was an odd one. Instead of the king, the second-born prince had the title of a Holy Elite, which was seen as an authoritative figure. It was like having two kings in the Kingdom of Velancia.

Was the title bestowed upon him or did he pry it from the king…? It’s hard to tell just by looking at him…

“What’s wrong, Prince Wein?” Tigris asked with a puzzled look as Wein pondered in silence.

“…Nothing. I suppose I was just overwhelmed to meet someone as distinguished as the king’s brother.”

“Ha-ha-ha, what a thing to say. I’m a nobody—a fool—compared to you and all you’ve been able to accomplish.”

“I refuse to believe that. A fool could never rise to the rank of a Holy Elite.”

“You’ve got it all wrong. I hate to admit that my brother is a recluse. He pushed this role on me, annoyed by the prospect of being invited to conferences for it.”

Tigris continued.

“Oh, but please don’t take this to mean that my brother and I don’t get along. I’d say we’re quite close. In fact, our relationship is similar to the one between you and your younger sister.”

“…I see.”

With Tigris in front of him, Wein could see the confidence in his every movement, his energy. Like Gruyere, Tigris was an unshakable pillar, and he didn’t give off a carefree vibe that he would wait around until something fell into his lap. He did what he needed to with his own hands. In other words—Tigris and Wein were cut from the same cloth.

“*I understand,* Prince Tigris*. I believe we’ll get along well.*”

“*I’m happy to hear you say so,* Prince Wein.”

Tensions were so high, you would have thought they were holding knives at each other’s throats, and yet the two had on mild smiles. The air between them was so suffocating, anyone with a weaker constitution would have struggled to breathe, but the giant observing from nearby was not one of them.

“Watching the youth fight pairs well with any drink,” Gruyere said, taking a sip of the wine in his hand. “I’m here as a mediator, so allow me to step in just this once. If the two of you play around too much, someone like Caldmellia will gleefully take advantage of you.”

The two younger men grimaced. Even if they pushed each other down, a third party would ultimately profit off them. It would be juvenile if they remained stubborn, especially when a king warned them of the obvious.

“…May we discuss the matter at hand, Prince Wein?”

“Yes, by all means.” Wein sighed, and Tigris began his explanation.

“You may have heard this from King Gruyere already. One of the topics to be addressed during this Gathering is King Skrei’s admission into the Holy Elite. To be honest, Levetia thinks this is a bit premature.”

“What do you mean? Isn’t it critical for Levetia to acquire Cavarin’s territory?”

"That's right. It's the *land* that's critical."

Wein realized what Tigris was getting at. "…I see. As long as Levetia has influence over its lands, the ruler doesn't necessarily need to be the authoritative power of its territory."

Without its king, Cavarin was on the decline, which meant its neighbors were preparing to swoop in and conquer it themselves, rather than reach out to help.

This was no different for the West. Although Levetia united them, it didn't guarantee friendship. One might say it was inevitable for them to seize this opportunity to extort people, resources, and land from Cavarin.

The biggest concern was the Eastern Empire pouncing on the chance, but luckily enough, they were preoccupied with a family squabble. The West could breathe a sigh of relief and flock around Cavarin.

"But now Prince Miroslav of the Falcasso Kingdom has stepped in."

Miroslav, another one of the Holy Elite. From what Wein had heard, this man was around his age.

"So the current king of Falcasso gave him the title of Holy Elite?" *Unlike you, Tigris*, Wein silently added.

Tigris beamed as if he could hear Wein's thoughts. "That's right. The king of Falcasso is already old, so he appointed the prince as a Holy Elite to start preparing for the transfer of power."

"That king is a difficult person. The thought of our many secret feuds gets my heart racing. Time is a cruel mistress for taking that away from us."

Gruyere seemed to be genuine. Based on Gruyere's attitude, Tigris's story, and the situation in Cavarin, Wein understood one thing.

"—In other words, you both don't think very highly of Miroslav."

Gruyere and Tigris flinched—just barely—at Wein's statement.

Miroslav was as young as Wein. He hardly had any experience in politics or foreign policy. Even if the transfer of power was inevitable, the Holy Elites understood this and showed no mercy.

"That was why he approached Skrei. If he joins your ranks, Skrei will acquire more allies, and your support will mean he can't go against Miroslav after he's appointed, right?"

When Wein pointed this out, Tigris broke into a wry smile.

"Are you assuming we don't think highly of him? We wouldn't dream of disrespecting a fellow Holy Elite. Right, King Gruyere?"

“But of course. As followers of Levetia, we strive to build honest and sincere connections.”

Wein snorted. They hadn’t corrected him on Miroslav’s goal.

“So,” he said, “the three of us will team up to compete against Miroslav and Skrei… Is that the main point of this meeting?”

“For the most part,” Tigris replied. “It’ll just be you and me, Prince. Unfortunately, King Gruyere turned me down.”

Wein glared at Gruyere. “…So King Gruyere isn’t involved in this discussion? I feel like I need some answers on why he’s allowed to sit in on this conversation.”

“You don’t have to glare at me. Witnessing this exchange was part of the deal when I set up this meeting between the two of you. Consider my lips sealed. I would never do something so boring like tell anyone else about this.”

“I do believe you on that point, King Gruyere.”

“……”

Wein looked at Gruyere for a while longer before finally turning back to Tigris. “…Tigris and I will team up. That’s fine. But what happens then? I’m just one prince.”

Wein might have been invited to the Gathering, but the Holy Elites would have the floor. He wasn’t sure he’d be allowed to say anything at all. After all, these foreign nations had spent the past several years learning they would get screwed over anytime he was involved.

“I agree it’d be risky for just the two of us. But I’ve actually got another connection waiting in the wings.”

“Who?”

“I can’t say. Well, not here anyway,” Tigris replied, glancing over at Gruyere. Even if he trusted the king, that apparently didn’t mean he’d spill every detail. “If you’re saying you’ll join me, I’ll introduce you once we arrive in Lushan.”

“And you think the three of us can turn the tables that way?”

“Yes. We’ll push for you to become the next Holy Elite instead of Skrei and rewrite the balance of power.”

There were currently six Holy Elites. Wein would be the seventh if all went according to plan. He didn’t know who this coconspirator was, but if it was another Holy Elite, Wein knew where Tigris’s mind was at. If three out

of seven Elites teamed up, they would have a substantial amount of power.

"…I get what you're saying, but there's one thing I want to check."

"Ask away."

"If this works out, what would you think about the relationship between Natra and the Empire?"

Of course, their success was purely hypothetical. Pushing Skrei aside to become a Holy Elite was difficult enough. Even if it wasn't, the other Holy Elites would do everything in their power to stop Wein. This was why the prince wanted to know what came after.

"Well, I would want you to respect the position of Holy Elite," Tigris answered.

So basically, to sever all ties.

The Empire was a potential enemy to the West, so it was unlikely the Holy Elites would welcome him into the fold with open arms, but Wein had something to say about that.

"Aren't you being restrictive? Physical combat isn't the only way to engage in war. Having a Holy Elite with strong connections to the East could be useful in a battle of the wits."

"I admit it could be key. Still, there's no guarantee this would always be to our benefit."

Gruyere smiled with delight as he watched their exchange. Although both men insisted Wein's ties to the East would give them an advantage, Tigris was clearly apprehensive that Wein might use his connections to betray them.

Prince Wein doesn't want to take a side, and Tigris wants to crush any chance of betrayal. No wonder they're at an impasse. Not to mention that even if Tigris recognizes the benefits of forming connections with the East, he doesn't think we need Natra as a proxy.

Tigris and Gruyere were of the same mind. Natra was a dangerous partner to deal with. Even if Wein did join them, Natra's relationship with the East was their greatest asset. Tigris, however, had no idea when they might betray the West and toss them aside. So he would take this advantage away from Natra and make it his own. He determined this to be the most ideal course of action, and—

"Ahh, *I wonder about that*," Wein said with a smirk. "If you're thinking about the future, I'd really say Natra is the better option."

Tigris and Gruyere caught the meaning behind his words in mere seconds.

The future? Oh, he's talking about once the three of them form an alliance and shift the balance of power among the Holy Elite.

As soon as one of us decides to take that influence for himself, the other two will be in the way.

If Natra continues to have open relations with the Empire, it'll be a source of criticism.

In other words, Prince Wein is saying, Accept my terms now so you can kill me easier later.

Gruyere couldn't help but smile, and Tigris groaned under his breath.

"…I see. I can't give you a definite answer here, but there's room for negotiation," Tigris replied. "And I do know one thing: Partnering with you is worth my while."

"Really?" Wein questioned as if testing the waters.

"Of course," Tigris replied with a self-assured nod.

It was confidence; he knew glory would shine down on him in the future. No, it was determination that said he would have it served to him through brute force if necessary. In the words of Gruyere, this man was keeping a massive beast within him. If Wein could make an ally out of him, nothing would be more reassuring.

And so, Wein thought, *That's why…*

I see why Gruyere is obsessed with him.

Tigris secretly admired Wein. He was still young but mature for his age—despite a lack of experience. He spoke fluidly and was quick on his feet. Most importantly, he didn't show a shred of timidity even in the presence of two Holy Elites. Every inch of him emanated a fierceness that said, *I'll exploit it every chance I get.* Tigris liked that about Wein. He didn't want submissive mediocrity in an ally. Only someone with skill that kept you on your toes would win him over.

And so, Tigris thought, *That's why…*

"—Okay, let's shake on it."

Wein extended his hand to Tigris, who smiled and took it. It was here that

their joint bid for power was formed.

Tigris is strong. There's no question this man will rise to the top.

Prince Wein is the real deal. If anything, he'll only get better from here on out.

Oddly enough, the two had reached the same conclusion.

I know Prince Wein has some kind of grand scheme in mind.

But Tigris's goals will never overlap with mine.

In that moment, they thought the same exact thing:

Whatever happens, I'll have to kill this guy in the end—

The meeting would be preserved for future generations in the historical records left behind by King Gruyere. The united front between Wein and Tigris, however, would be extremely short-lived. As the people of successive eras pondered what might have happened if their collaboration had only lasted longer, their relationship was dubbed as thus:

An unlucky alliance.

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"I'd say that was pretty productive," Gruyere abruptly remarked.

He saw Tigris off with Wein as the prince left for his original transit point to prevent news of their clandestine meeting from leaking.

"You, Tigris, and a mysterious third party, huh? Looks like our Gathering is going to be quite a show."

"You're pretty relaxed about this, Gruyere," Wein said, glancing at him. "Do you plan on casting the deciding vote? Don't forget you're part of the Gathering, too. If you watch the rest of us fool around, you might end up on the menu before you know it."

These incendiary words deepened Gruyere's smile.

"In this world, the most rewarding lives get a kick out of putting themselves on the line. And don't forget, Prince Wein. The day I pay you back for my recent failure is sooner than you think—"

And so the meeting came to a peaceful conclusion. The next day, Wein's

and Gruyere's parties set out for Lushan, where the beasts were waiting up ahead, thinking of their secret feud.

The old capital of Lushan was a city situated in the heart of the West. It was the location where Levetia, the founder of the religion, received a revelation from God to embark on a pilgrimage. Obeying this epiphany, Levetia circled the continent once, spreading God's Word and gaining converts. With these new followers, the leader founded the city of Lushan, which became the crux of the religion. It was the heart of the Western continent both geographically and spiritually.

In the present day, Lushan and the surrounding area were treated not as a part of a country, but as a vicinity directly under Levetia's control.

"—The townscape is surprisingly average," Ninym murmured as she stared out the window of the swaying carriage.

"Yeah, it's pretty behind on the times, but it really does feel like your typical Western city," replied her carriage mate, Wein.

It wasn't strange, though. Lushan was the standard for Western architectural design. In other words, other Western cities were copies of Lushan, not the other way around.

"The vibe in the city feels different," Wein pointed out.

"Yes. It's almost eerily solemn and quiet… Its population is large, but most of them wear the Circles, and many are pious believers."

The Circles were a symbol of Levetia that devout followers wore around their necks. Primarily made of metal, they consisted of two perfectly round, interconnected circles, each about the size of one's palm. One represented God's completeness while the other represented a continent where the word of Levetia reached every corner.

"From what I can tell, there are just as many pilgrims as locals. Makes sense since they set up a million roads to make sure these trips are easy to

navigate."

"Yes, most of the Western nations do have a direct path to Lushan," Ninym added.

"That's because the city doesn't seem to cultivate many crops. Even the heart of Levetia is bound to dry up if it's hard to get through these parts." Wein looked at the worshippers outside the window. "Anyway, it impresses me that they can bear to wear those Circles all the time. They must have so many knots in their shoulders."

"Just so you know, you might want to consider wearing one at the Gathering, too, Wein."

"…Do they have any light, wood ones?"

"That wouldn't befit His Royal Highness, now would it?"

Wein grumbled, "Yeah, I guess." The carriage arrived in the heart of Lushan. They were greeted by an enormous plaza, and an even larger building lorded over it.

The Agency of the Holy King. The central pillar of Levetia. All who looked upon it were overcome with awe by its stonemasonry and an undeniable presence. Even the palace couldn't match its magnificence.

"Well, I better go in the lair of demons for a formal greeting. Ninym, stay with Falanya at the inn they reserved for us."

The headquarters of Levetia. Even if her hair was dyed black, this was no place a Flahm like Ninym could easily enter.

"Be careful, Wein."

"If worst comes to worst, I'll set it on fire and make my escape."

Wein left Ninym and stepped out of the carriage. Together with several guards, he entered the Agency of the Holy King.

…Well, would ya look at that.

The place had an austere atmosphere. There was no gold or silver or lavish ornamentation anywhere to be seen. The ceiling was as tall as several people, and the cold stone walls that seemingly continued into forever felt unreal.

It was like being lost in another world.

Streams of people came and went through its doors. They wore simple habits and silently walked with their heads held high. One could say they were paragons of Levetia, but their lack of humanity made them seem more like life-size dolls.

I wasn't joking when I called this place a "lair of demons."

Was it always like this, or was it the current ruler's influence? Just as Wein realized he'd have to brace himself—

"It's been quite some time, Crown Prince."

A chill ran up his spine. When he turned toward the voice, he was met by a woman standing there with her retinue. She was ravishing. Her hair shimmered, and her eyes were as deep as the abyss. With features that were a mix between the charm of a young woman and the vitality of a little girl, it was hard to believe she was even of this earth.

"What a surprise…I'm honored Lady Caldmellia would welcome me herself."

The director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau, Caldmellia. A woman who was a force to be reckoned with, second only to the Holy Elites.

And now, she was standing right before Wein.

"You are a guest of honor who has kindly accepted our invitation. Such hospitality is only natural."

Caldmellia smiled sweetly. From her grin to her gaze, every part of this woman hid both a mystique and repulsiveness incongruent to her holy profession.

"Is this your first time visiting Lushan? What do you think of the old capital?"

"As one might expect of Levetia's birthplace, it has a stately and refined atmosphere."

"Ha-ha. It must seem that way for outsiders, but it's far more relaxed than usual. It has been quite a while since the Gathering of the Chosen was last held in Lushan, and the citizens are in a festive mood."

"*This* is festive? If I were to visit Lushan on a normal day, I fear I might suffocate from its stiff formalities."

"You will grow accustomed to it, Prince Wein… At any rate, I'll be in trouble if I force our guest of honor to stand around chatting any longer. Please, come this way. Someone is waiting for you."

There was no need to ask who that "someone" was. Guided by Caldmellia, Wein and his guards continued farther into the structure.

“I’m relieved to see you appear no different from our last meeting, Lady Caldmellia.”

“By God’s good grace, yes—I’m in good health.”

According to records, Caldmellia was over sixty years old, though she appeared to be in her thirties. Even her twenties wouldn’t be a stretch. There was talk that this Caldmellia was someone else who had inherited the name. Either way, the word “monster” fit her terrifyingly well.

“Please forgive me if this comes across as rude, but do you have a secret to good health?”

“By living life. A satisfactory life is the key to youth and vitality.”

“That’s not an answer I would expect from a follower of Levetia.”

“Repressing your needs is not the only way to show loyalty to God. King Gruyere is a great example of this.”

“…Yes, I see.” Wein found himself nodding as she cited Gruyere’s paunch. “And what brings you joy, Lady Caldmellia?”

“Guiding lost sheep who have gone astray,” she replied. “It’s fulfilling when my words set them on the right path.”

“…I’m certain your guidance brings them days of utmost bliss, Lady Caldmellia.”

“I hope so.”

Their conversation was temporarily interrupted. Cold footsteps echoed as if manifestations of the air between them. Caldmellia was the first to break the silence.

“It seems that you have really come into your own, Your Highness.”

“Do you think so? I feel like I’ve been collecting problems since becoming regent, so I was worried I might be crushed under the pressure.”

“With your accomplishments, I imagine you’d be able to stand up straight with pride…though it has inflated your ego.”

“My accomplishments? I’ve just been lucky to keep up with the times.”

Wein shrugged his shoulders, but Caldmellia shook her head.

“There are too many people to count who find it impossible to keep up. Natra is blessed to have you at its head during this tumultuous time.”

“Well, it’s too early to say whether that is actually a blessing,” Wein replied. “After all, our time will see even greater turbulence in the future. Whether I am remembered as Natra’s savior or a quack doctor who only managed to keep his dying nation afloat a little while longer…will only be

determined once everything is over."

"I see… You're quite right."

"That is to say nothing of the tidal wave approaching us imminently."

Caldmellia brushed off Wein's sarcasm with a smile. "Shall I offer a hand if you're drowning, Your Highness?"

"While I appreciate the gesture, the waters might suck you in, too."

"Hee-hee, drowning with you, Prince, might make things interesting."

With this, the group arrived at a large door. When Caldmellia's subordinate opened it, an expansive room, the throne within it, and the person sitting atop it came into view.

"—Your Holiness, Prince Wein has arrived."

Upon hearing her introduction, the figure broke out of a deep meditation.

This is…

Holy King Silverio. The man sitting at the pinnacle of both the Holy Elites and the Levetia religion was right there.

"Come forward, Crown Prince."

At Caldmellia's insistence, Wein stepped farther into the audience chamber, mentally taking note of Silverio. From what he could tell, the Holy King was up there in years. He had a small frame, and his hands were withered. His eyes were clouded white, presumably from age, and the cane at hand nearby indicated that his legs were not what they once were. Wein worried he might be crushed by the weight of his robes, and his overall impression of the king was one of frailty.

From what I heard, he's the type to eat and drink nothing for a month, praying for citizens who have fallen victim to disaster or persuading a group of bandits by marching into their den himself. In fact, there's talk going around that he's a puppet and Caldmellia is behind all this…

Caldmellia walked ahead to stand by the Holy King's side, and Wein understood something after seeing them next to each other. On one side was the youthful Caldmellia, and on the other was Holy King Silverio, who was more decaying branch than human. Anyone would agree that it looked like the witch was sucking the life out of the Holy King.

Wein's heart didn't lower its guard for a second, however.

After all, he carries the most precious blood in the entire world.

Compared to most of the other Holy Elites who were royalty, Silverio was a Holy King who held no secular position. Without the titles of Holy King

and Holy Elite, he would be an average clergyman. Even if such a thing were to hypothetically happen, however, Silverio would never be treated like a normal person for the rest of his days. This was because Silverio was a descendent of Levetia—the founder of their religion.

I'm not one to talk, but I do find it impressive that this bloodline has been tracked so meticulously for a century.

To become a Holy Elite, one of the conditions was that one must be blood-related to either the founder, Levetia, or one of the leading disciples—people of the distant past. Genealogy was a complex and obscure matter, and it wasn't rare for some to use power and money to keep this title in the family. A majority of the present Holy Elites had no definitive proof of their actual blood relations.

Among them, Wein and Silverio were the odd exceptions who could clearly trace back their roots. Of course, their statuses were worlds apart since Wein was just a descendent of a lead disciple, while Silverio was a descendent of their founder.

All generations of Silverio's family were born, raised, and served as clergy in Lushan. Many of them were appointed not just as Holy Elites but later as Holy Kings.

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If a Holy Elite with a secular position becomes a Holy King, it grants a substantial amount of power to their home country. It seems like in many cases, Silverio's family—who don't have titles or land—would become Holy Kings, to prevent a single country from getting an unfair advantage. As a result, they have produced many Holy Kings.

It was no mistake to think their elevated status was intentional. Wein himself placed no stock in bloodlines, but he knew the public thought they were worth something. Silverio's family must have believed the same thing. That was why they spent long months and years trying to increase the value of their blood.

Now standing next to each other was a descendant from this shrewd family and the witch who relished sending people to their doom. Anyone who could relax at this point would also probably feel comfortable napping in front of a starving tiger.

"…It's an honor to meet you, Your Holiness. I've come from Natra to accept your generous invitation to the Gathering of the Chosen."

As Wein gave his textbook greeting, he peered at Silverio. The Holy King gave no reaction. Both his eyes and ears seemed very distant, and he suddenly turned to Caldmellia and whispered something. Wein couldn't catch it, but she gave him a small nod.

"His Holiness welcomes you."

It wasn't at all rare for statesmen to maintain a degree of separation and an air of mystery by refusing to speak directly to their vassals and citizens. In this case, however, it was likely because raising his voice was too exhausting for someone Silverio's age.

It's hard to get a read on him. I wanna learn more about this Holy King, but— Wein was deep in thought.

"The Gathering of the Chosen will commence the day after tomorrow. Until then, please rest from your travels in the residence we have provided."

They were apparently eager to end the conversation, and Wein mentally clucked his tongue in irritation.

"Thank you for your consideration. Before I take my leave, however, I wish to confirm something with His Holiness: the true reason I've been called to this conference."

Wein cut straight to the heart of the matter, but Caldmellia answered as if she'd been expecting him to bring this up.

"As mentioned in His Holiness's personal missive, the precursor to turmoil currently hangs over Varno. We do not know when the disturbance in the Empire will spread to the West. We wish to discuss how to deal with this matter during the Gathering and have thus invited you, Prince Wein, to hear about your insight on the Empire and seek guidance."

"…I understand now." Wein stole a glance at the Holy King once again, but Silverio didn't move a muscle. He apparently couldn't hope to see any voluntary reactions.

Should I try provoking him…?

He was several steps away from the Holy King's throne. There were a limited number of guards. If Wein wanted to, he could get right up in Silverio's face. He'd be able to read whether the king took on a look of confusion, fear, anger—anything.

I can't secure a disposal method or an escape route here, so it would be unrealistic to do something about the Holy King, but if I took a step toward him—

What would happen then?

As soon as the thought crossed Wein's mind, a naked blade came at his throat.

"——!" Wein instinctively took a step back.

"Whatever is the matter, Prince Wein?" Caldmellia tilted her head with a puzzled expression, and it was then that Wein realized there was no knife to be found.

You've gotta be kidding…

Her presence was so strong that he'd imagined a knife was flying at him.

It wasn't Caldmellia who had done this. Wein's behavior confused the guards around him. The only one to remain still as stone…was the Holy King.

Feeling sweat drip down the side of his temple, Wein gave a tight-lipped smile. "…Worry not. It seems I'm just a bit fatigued from the journey."

Holy King Silverio. He was not a foe to be underestimated.

"In that case, you ought to rest at the estate. I shall ready a carriage immediately."

"Thank you. It would be unfortunate if I were to catch cold and be unable to attend the Gathering."

"Both His Holiness and I look forward to hearing your honest opinion,

Prince Wein."

"I have nothing to offer, but I shall try my best to meet your expectations. —Well then, if you'll excuse me."

Wein bowed to the Holy King and Caldmellia before turning on his heel. He soon disappeared behind the door.

"…Mellia."

Without missing a beat, Caldmellia waited upon Silverio and strained to hear his raspy voice.

"Will this individual help our flower bloom?"

"Without question."

"I see…" Silverio murmured. "A great flower to swallow up this land… It's sure to be beautiful."

"I promise to show it to you, Your Holiness."

Silverio's clouded eyes seemed to gaze into the distance, and Caldmellia gave a respectful bow.

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"I just wanna go hooooooome!" Wein shrieked in one of the rooms of the manor allotted to him, after safely returning from the Agency of the Holy King.

"We can't leave yet. We just got here, and the Gathering hasn't even started yet."

Ninym's typical dismissal of his comments only encouraged Wein to continue.

"Obviously! But Caldmellia will always be bad news, and I got a feeling that the Holy King is, too. With the two of them attending the Gathering, it'll spell the worst news of the year! We've hit max suckage levels, and I'm screwed if I don't show up! What did I do to deserve this?!"

"I thought I heard you say, *Don't you underestimate me, Caldmellia*, on the way here."

"Let's just pretend I didn't!"

"No take-backs."

"Gweh," Wein groaned. "Come to think of it, what's Falanya up to?"

"She went to bed early to prepare for the party tomorrow. The princess is fretting about going in your place and doing a job that'll please you."

Ninym broke into a tiny smile, and Wein grinned wryly.

"She doesn't have to get *that* worked up over it. Well, at least Falanya's not running into any problems. I can just focus on the Gathering."

A knock came at the door. A servant.

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“Your Highness, there is a messenger from Prince Tigris in front of the estate. He wishes to meet with you.”

Wein and Ninym immediately looked at each other.

“Understood. Let him in.”

It didn’t take long for the servant to return with the messenger.

“I am Fushto. I serve Master Tigris.”

The messenger in front of Wein bowed down. He had to be one of the people who had waited on Tigris when they met the other day.

“I have come to deliver both a spoken message and a letter to you, Prince Wein.”

“I’m listening.”

Fushto’s gaze turned to Ninym nearby.

“She’s my Heart. There’s no reason for her to leave,” Wein said.

“My apologies, but Master Tigris’s message is of utmost importance.”

“Then I definitely need her here.”

“……” Fushto grimaced, and Wein glared at him.

“If you can’t respect my decision, then get out. And tell Prince Tigris that our alliance is done.”

“…My apologies. I spoke out of turn. Please forgive me.”

Tigris himself might not have had the same reaction, but Fushto was a servant. When Wein threatened to annul the partnership, the man had no choice but to comply. Fushto pulled out a letter from his breast pocket and handed it to Ninym. The wax seal was unmistakably Velancia’s, and inside was a message from Tigris and a map.

“Tomorrow evening, he has arranged for a meeting with a third party at an abandoned manor outside the city as indicated on the map. The contents of the letter state the same thing.”

“Oh, this is the individual I’ve been hearing about. Who is it?”

“I’m sorry. I am not privy to that information.”

“Prince Tigris loves secrets, it seems. Anyway, tell him I understand.”

“Yes, of course.” Fushto bowed once and quickly left the room to report to his master. After they watched him leave, Ninym mumbled quietly, breaking her silence. “…You didn’t have to be so stubborn.”

“I wasn’t being stubborn. I was stating the obvious.”

This made Ninym look happy but troubled. She coughed and quickly returned to her normal self. “So you have a secret meeting tomorrow?”

"Seems that way. Who do you think this third person is, Ninym?"

She thought for a moment. "Most likely another Holy Elite…but it's not King Gruyere apparently, and Prince Miroslav is backing King Skrei, so it couldn't be him either."

"And if you take out Tigris, that leaves us with the Holy King, Steel, or Agata."

"Since His Holiness already has power, I doubt he'd go along with such an underhanded scheme. That leaves either Duke Steel or Representative Agata. You've caught Duke Steel's eye, right, Wein?"

Wein looked queasy. "I'm not thrilled about that, but yeah, apparently… Ugh, I don't wanna team up with Steel. Maybe Skrei came up to Tigris out of nowhere and shook things up."

"If we're just speculating, I wonder if Prince Miroslav will also do something. He might give up on King Skrei if he's less compliant than expected."

"If he's looking to replace Skrei, wouldn't Miroslav come to me himself? Or maybe he thinks it'll be hard to back me on his own, since I'm not someone who abides by the rules like Skrei. In that case, if we team up… Hmm."

Wein crossed his arms and groaned. After all, he was up against the Holy Elites. These guys could put on sunny smiles in front of their constituents even as a laundry list of machinations were in their heads. It would be no surprise if someone out of left field was waiting for him.

"Who do you hope it is?"

"Doesn't matter to me as long as they'll hear me out and aren't a pain to deal with."

"And who would that be?"

"No one…"

Her master's listlessness put a tiny smile on Ninym's face.

"And what if it was Director Caldmellia?" she asked.

"I'd go home," Wein answered without missing a beat.

He really *isn't a fan*, she thought to herself.

"Well, not even Tigris would think of joining forces with *her*. It's hard to be friends with a person who will never be swayed by logic or data."

"Well, at any rate, should we look further into our main suspects—Duke Steel and Representative Agata—while we wait for tomorrow night?"

“Sounds like a plan.”

With Wein’s permission, Ninym quickly set off to gather the necessary documents.

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Early the next morning.

“…Nngh.”

In her room in the mansion, Falanya woke up a bit earlier than usual. Her waking time wasn’t the only part that was different. It usually took her a while to shake off the last vestiges of sleep, but the princess was different today. She smacked her cheeks with both hands, firmly shrugged off the tempting invitation of her soft bed to sleep in, and ran out of her bedchamber.

“Good morning, Princess Falanya. You’re looking well this morning.”

“Of course. After all, I have an important job to do today,” she responded with a proud sniff as her lady-in-waiting helped her get dressed.

She would be mingling with the continent’s most influential people in place of her brother. Falanya had enjoyed similar opportunities since her experience in Mealtars, but she had the same reaction every time.

“You’ll run out of steam if you get too worked up.”

Once she was dressed and the lady-in-waiting had taken her leave, Nanaki appeared out of nowhere.

“Don’t worry, I slept well. Nerves and excitement didn’t stop me from getting a good night’s rest!”

She wasn’t bluffing either. She’d never felt better, and her heart was burning with passion. Falanya was positive the day was going to be a great success.

Nanaki knew she’d crash and burn if she kept this up, even with the extra sleep. It didn’t pose much of an issue to him, however, so he stayed silent.

“Important things first, Nanaki: I’d like to confirm the schedule for today. Let’s go meet Wein.”

“Didn’t you do that last night?”

“Come on.”

She’ll find any excuse to see her brother, Nanaki thought as Falanya half dragged him.

Just as he approached Wein’s room with the princess, who was on cloud

nine…

"…One sec, Falanya."

"Huh? What's wrong?"

Not responding to her questioning looks, Nanaki quietly cracked open the door to Wein's room. He stood still for a few seconds before trying to shut it again.

"What is it, Nanaki?" Falanya leaned on him and tried to peek into the room. She saw Wein and Ninym, and—

"Should I add dye to the comb before I brush it?"

"Yes, but it might get on your fingers."

"It's no big deal. C'mon, Ninym, face the mirror."

"Okay, okay."

Falanya could see her brother was reapplying black dye to Ninym's hair. The master gathered up his servant's hair and started to comb it gently. This was something that would be absolutely forbidden in public.

"It'd be much faster if I did it myself."

"Relax. Let me try it once."

"Fine…"

Wein, triumphant. Ninym, embarrassed. Falanya had a feeling she shouldn't be watching this intimate moment between the two people whom she so admired, and her cheeks flushed.

"Umm… We probably shouldn't interrupt them."

"Good call. Also, you're heavy, Falanya."

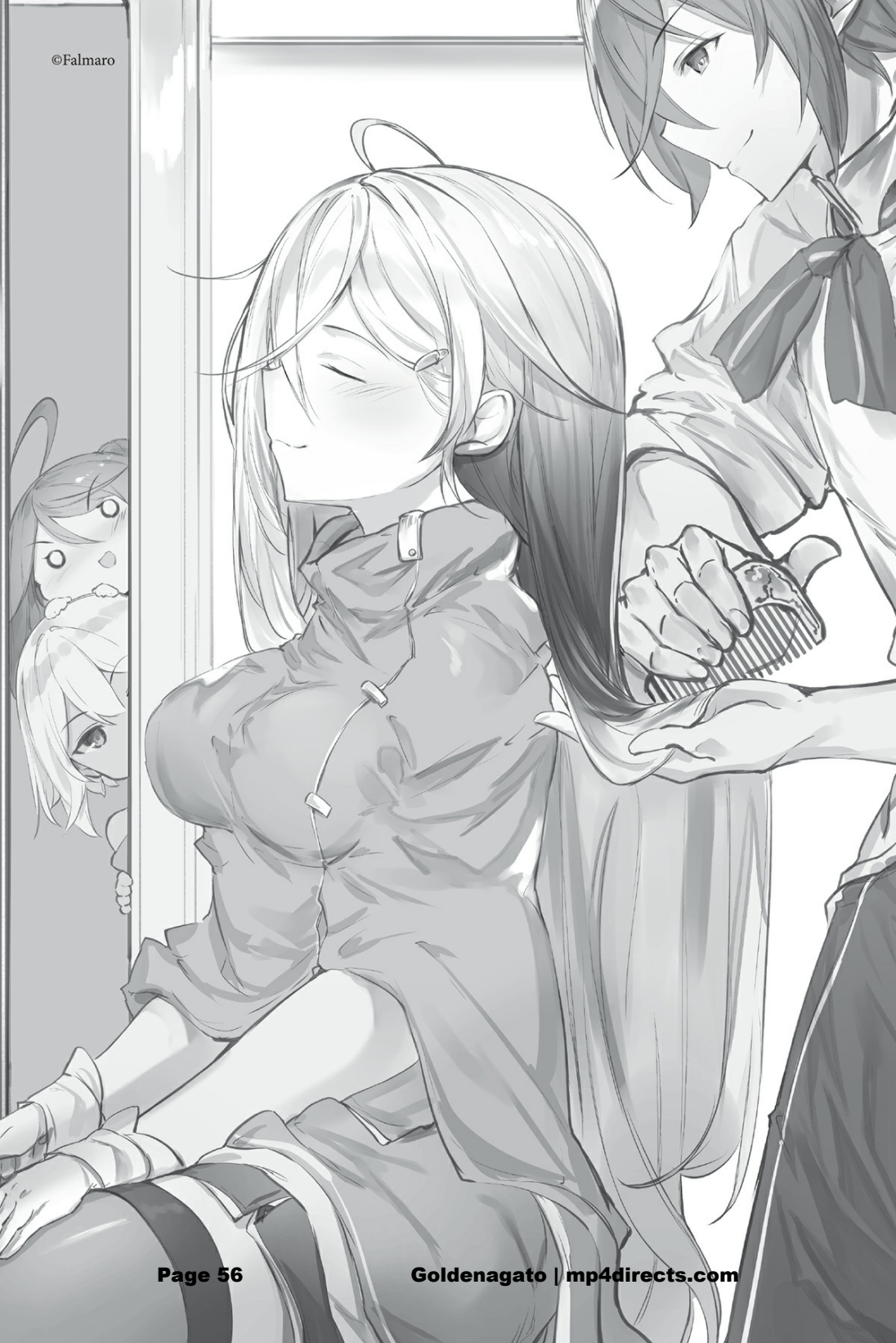
"Am not."

As this exchange took place—

"Hey."

"Mrwagh?!"

It didn't take long until Wein spotted them.



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“What are you doing over there? Make up your mind. If you’re going to come in, hurry up.”

“O-okay.”

Wein left no room for argument. Stiff as a board, Falanya stepped inside. Ninym had already moved from the front of the mirror to a corner of the room, and she broke out into a tiny smile when she saw Falanya. The princess whimpered under her breath.

“So do you have business with me this early in the morning, Falanya?”

“W-well, I thought I should run the schedule by you,” she replied hesitantly.

Wein nodded. “Okay. I’ll be looking over papers in the manor, and you’ll be going to the party in my place. Ninym will investigate the location of the meetup tonight.”

“What meetup tonight?” Falanya asked, tilting her head.

“Ah,” Wein said. “You went to bed early. One of Prince Tigris’s messengers stopped by yesterday. I’ll be having a chat with a third party tonight.”

Falanya had also heard that Wein would have a secret meeting with Tigris at some point, but now that it was upon them, her chest was heavy with worry.

“Will you be okay, Wein?”

“It might be dangerous, but I’d say it’s worthwhile.”

“I will do my best to confirm nothing suspicious awaits us.”

Falanya nodded at both of them. They didn’t totally dispel her fears, but she knew that she could trust them when they had set their minds on something.

“Well, that’s the gist of things. I made a list of the important people you might meet at the party, so be sure to review it. Anything else you’re worried about?”

Falanya shook her head. Wein nodded and stroked her hair.

“I’m counting on you. I’m sure you’re nervous, but I know you’ll do great.”

“Ah… Of course! I can handle it!” Falanya instantly beamed, and her energy—once depleted—seemed to spike. *I’m an accomplished princess*, she thought.

“So, Ninym, ready to pick up where we left off?”

“Oh, are you sure?”

“Yeah, we were in the middle of things… Hm?” Wein noticed his little sister fidgeting and looked at her quizzically. “What’s wrong, Falanya?”

“N-nothing!” Falanya shook her head and latched on to Nanaki’s arm. “That’s all I have to say, s-so if you’ll excuse me…!”

She raced out of the room like a windstorm.

“…What was that all about?”

Wein tilted his head, and Ninym observed the siblings with a gentle smile.

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—Let’s get this started.

Hours after Wein and Falanya’s touching scene…

Ninym set out right on schedule and walked through the silent city. A hood fell over her eyes as she swiftly made her way to her destination—the secret meeting point. There were any number of matters that required preliminary inspection, most obviously the basic route, but she also had to check if there were any traps or anything strange at the location itself and map out an escape route just in case.

I think it’s up ahead.

The outskirts of Lushan. Although the town was still sleeping when Ninym left the manor, she could sense human activity, which weakened the closer she got to this area.

If I remember correctly, Lushan’s repeated expansion—desperate to keep up with its development—created pockets beyond the government’s control. This must be one of them.

Some of these areas became slums and places teeming with ne’er-do-wells. Even if her hair was dyed black and concealed under a hood, Ninym was still a Flahm and a woman. To avoid any unnecessary trouble, she kept a close eye on her surroundings as she hurried toward her destination.

Eventually, she arrived in front of a large, dilapidated house. It must have once been a splendid manor, but the wind and rain had left it in a horrible state. Part of the exterior was charred, and from what she could tell from the carbonization, the building must have been abandoned after an accidental fire and never demolished.

At least nothing in its surroundings seems out of place.

Just rocks and weeds. It was obvious the building had been left uninhabited for a long time. In that case, her next order of business was checking inside the mansion. Ninym slowly entered the doorless entrance and surveyed the interior.

A drafty entrance hall with corridors on both sides, some doors, a stairway, a chandelier…

The inside was in as bad shape as the outside. There were hardly any furnishings, and everything left had been partially destroyed. It was just an abandoned building.

It would be difficult to investigate this place. If it were tidy, anything suspicious would stick out, but she'd never be able to spot trouble under debris. Ninym wished she had either more time or more help, but the secret meeting was in the evening, and mobilizing a large band was bound to draw attention in this area.

"I can't just sit around and complain."

Ninym looked down and spotted multiple human footprints in a pile of dust. She was experienced enough to pick up the owner's intentions from simple tracks. Some sought shelter from the wind and rain, others came in search of valuable items, and others—like hers—were the fresh marks of people investigating the manor.

Prince Tigris or the mysterious third person must have scoped this place out ahead of time.

It made sense now that she thought about it. They must have struggled with the short time frame and limited help, too. If so, then Ninym had no choice but to do the same. She picked up the pace and resumed her search.

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As Wein was in the middle of his research, and Ninym was inspecting the location of the planned rendezvous…

"*Haaah…*" Falanya let out a pained sigh at the party in a certain manor.

"Are you okay?" Nanaki asked as he stood at attention by her side.

"Somehow…but I didn't imagine it would be this big," she replied listlessly.

Parties of different sizes were being hosted throughout the city to welcome the beginning of the Gathering of the Chosen. Only the Holy Elites

could attend the actual conference, but they also brought along their chief vassals, who would make good connections for merchants and other people of status. The objective of the host city was to entertain these groups who had time to kill during the Gathering.

Falanya enjoyed their hospitality for the same reasons. As the younger sister of Wein—the leader of Natra—and a forerunner in her own right during the events in Mealtars, Falanya had a reputation that was spreading both domestically and abroad. In light of this, many of the continent's most influential people had approached her, and as a result, she was completely wiped out.

"Umm, I've greeted forty…no, fifty people? Their names were…"

Falanya mumbled to herself as she recalled the names and faces of everyone she'd met. She had eluded the wave of people the second she had a chance to make her escape and found refuge out on the empty terrace. There was no time to rest, however. She turned her mind on full throttle and drove them into her memory.

"Huh? Umm, the name of the thirtieth person I met, the woman in the red dress, was…"

"Lady Mallory, correct?"

"That's it!"

The one who answered her question was Falanya's other attendant, Sirgis.

"Thanks a bunch, Sirgis. Good memory."

"I have memorized most everyone, so call upon me if you need assistance. I believe it is easier to remember names and faces if you take note of a unique characteristic of theirs."

"My brother said the same thing. More information means more clues, so it's hard to forget…in theory," Falanya moaned.

"I am honored to share a similar custom with Prince Wein, as trivial as this might be. Then again, I myself recognized quite a few familiar faces."

Ah, Falanya thought, realization dawning on her.

Sirgis was a former prime minister. If he hadn't fallen from power, he would have likely been invited as a guest like Falanya and enjoyed the attention of the other attendees.

But no one has approached him…

He used to be in a position of power, even if he had been demoted. It wouldn't be strange for a close acquaintance to call out to him, but everyone

at the party had their eyes on Falanya.

Sirgis smiled in self-deprecation, seeming to read her mind.

"One is not just their social statue… So what if I may be able to recall people's faces? It took me losing everything to realize something so obvious. I keep confronting my shortcomings every day."

"…Umm…"

As the sister of the person responsible for his misfortune, she didn't know how to respond. Just as she wondered what she should do, two people appeared on the terrace.

"Ah, here you are, Princess Falanya."

She straightened her posture, and her eyes widened. "Oh…Mayor Cosimo!"

"It's been some time, Your Highness."

One of the pair, an older gentleman, bowed politely. His name was Cosimo, the mayor of the merchant city of Mealtars, which was located at the center of the continent. Falanya had socialized with him during her previous trip there.

"Why are you here? We're in the West," she asked.

"Ha-ha-ha, if I failed to attend this function, it would tarnish my merchant name. Other merchants from Mealtars are on their way, it seems. And I'm officially here on holiday, so there's no need to worry about political tensions."

Mealtars was in Imperial territory, and Mayor Cosimo himself was a citizen of the Empire. For merchants, however, such logic was nonsense that would never help make a sale.

"I haven't seen you in some time, Sir Sirgis. I heard you were currently serving Princess Falanya; life is full of surprises, I must say."

Cosimo went to dip his head to Sirgis, but the latter held up a hand in refusal.

"…I am now just a vassal. There is no need to bow."

"Why, it's common for a market price to drop in the world of business. That's when a merchant's eye is tested."

Cosimo said this with a smile before turning back to Falanya and indicating the person next to him.

"My apologies for the late introduction. My acquaintance was searching for you, Princess Falanya, so I brought him with me."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Princess Falanya,” said a young man with suntanned skin and a kind smile. “I am Felite, the leader of Patura. Your brother, Prince Wein, previously came to my aid.”

“Oh!”

Felite of Patura. She had heard the name from Wein. After a series of twists and turns, her brother had struck up a friendship with him while visiting the islands.

“I’ve heard about you for some time now, Sir Felite, but I never imagined we would meet here.”

“Prince Wein has told me about you. You’re as lovely as the rumors.”

Oh, you flatter me, she thought with a sheepish grin.

“Were you also invited to the Gathering of the Chosen, Sir Felite?”

“No, I have come to Lushan to introduce myself as the new head of Patura. Notable members of every nation have gathered here, so it’s helpful to speak with them all in one turn.”

I see, Falanya mused in understanding. She had heard his father died suddenly. His goals seemed to be very similar to her own.

“I would also like to speak with Prince Wein personally. I realize it is an impudent request, but could you ask if he might spare a few moments of his time?”

“Ask my brother?”

She couldn’t answer too quickly. Falanya would normally nod and agree without a second thought, but Wein had to focus on the Gathering, and it was her job to assist him.

“…I will gladly speak with you first. After all, my brother requested that I manage his affairs to the capacity I can.”

Falanya’s heart was racing inside. She was pushing herself out of her comfort zone. But if not here, where would she have the chance to do such a thing? Falanya had already decided she would no longer be the girl who only delivered letters to her big brother.

“…I see. It seems I have been rude,” Felite replied and stared at Falanya for a moment. He then smiled. “My apologies, Princess Falanya. I will delay the matter no further. It concerns trade between Patura and Natra.”

It was here that Cosimo, who had been silently observing them thus far, perked up. “Oh dear, would it be best if I excuse myself?”

“Not at all. This involves the Empire as well,” Felite answered before

continuing. “You are aware that the products Natra purchases from the Empire are being exported to Patura, correct? These Imperial wares have become a bit of an issue in our lands.”

“Oh, d-do they have some sort of defect?”

“No, it’s the opposite. The merchandise is of excellent quality. Because of this, they have earned a good reputation among our citizens.”

Falanya thought this over for a few moments. “Umm… What might the problem be?” she asked, cocking her head.

Ever the businessman, Cosimo had years of experience that quickly led him to the answer. “…I see. This concerns money and distance, doesn’t it?”

Felite nodded. “The Imperial products are high-grade. It makes sense that the cost of transporting them—because they are coming from the Empire through Natra and traveling halfway across the continent—will be reflected in the price. Even with this in mind, however, they are so superior that the people demand them regardless.”

“That…sounds like quite a good thing to me.” Falanya still couldn’t see the issue, and it was once again Cosimo who explained things to her.

“Princess Falanya, expensive items are difficult to obtain. There will be some citizens who don’t have it. If that happened, would they give up? No, they will think, *How can I get it for cheaper?*”

“…Ah.” Realization finally dawned on Falanya. “And Patura has a poor relationship with the Empire…”

Cosimo continued. “Yes, there has long been animosity between the two. One might say it’s a result of our historical divide. With Imperial goods flowing into Patura, however, the people are growing more fascinated by the Empire, and this barrier is starting to lower.”

“In other words, people might start smuggling goods.”

“Precisely. Our political feud might keep us away, but Patura is a short distance northeast of Imperial lands. One can import for a much cheaper price there than via Natra.”

Felite spoke up. “For Patura, our trade with Natra is a symbol of friendship. I have no intention of disrespecting that. However, the reality is that we will soon be overwhelmed by smuggled goods and unable to sell the goods procured through your country. That is why I wish to discuss how we should conduct business from this point forward.”

“…Please excuse me for a moment.” Falanya tugged at Sirgis’s sleeve

and pulled him aside. “Sirgis, I have a feeling this is really bad news.”

“Yes, to put it mildly, it will void at least half of the deal Prince Wein brought back from Patura.”

Wagh! Falanya wordlessly screamed. “Wh-what should we do?!”

“…This situation is far beyond your discretion. For now, let us return and seek Prince Wein’s opinion.”

“B-but I acted all important while listening to them just now…”

“Princess, acting as a representative is one part of a politician’s job. However, it is not good practice to meddle with the future of the nation—just to save face. You must swallow your pride—it would not look good for you otherwise.”

Falanya started to say something but stopped herself. She turned to Felite once more. “…I understand your request, Sir Felite. I wish to invite you to our current lodgings here once I discuss the matter with my brother. I believe we will be able to speak more then. What do you think?”

Felite nodded slowly. “I understand. Please send Prince Wein my regards,” he said before gently continuing to Falanya, who pursed her lips. “If I may be so bold, you seem to be wise despite a lack of experience, Princess Falanya. I’m certain Prince Wein is proud.”

“…Thank you very much.”

Falanya’s heart filled with embarrassment, frustration, and even a little relief as the man she was supposed to be negotiating with tried to smooth things over.

Cosimo looked at her as if she were his own daughter. “Well now, it seems that our discussion here is over. Shall we head back inside? When you’re as old as I am, even the autumn winds feel cold to the skin.”

“Yes, let’s. After you, Princess Falanya.”

“Th-thank you.”

Urged on by the pair, Falanya entered the manor once more.

This was no time to be depressed, she scolded herself. There was still plenty to be done.

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She concluded that all investigated areas were free of any traps or suspicious activity. Of course, it was impossible to check *everything*. She was nervous

she'd made some oversight, but there was no place to hide a large group of soldiers or lay a trap at the very least. There was a chance the rickety house might collapse at a moment's notice, though.

After confirming their potential escape route, Ninym wrapped up her duties and left the ruined building. Wein probably still had his eyes glued to those documents. *I better hurry and help him*, she thought as she went back the way she'd come.

Just then—

"…That's…"

Just as Ninym was about to enter the more populated part of town, she spotted human shadows by the wayside.

"Hey, old man, what happened? Cat got your tongue?"

"Fork over your stuff, already."

A finely dressed old man was being harassed by two men.

"……"

Drawing attention to herself was a bad idea. She had an urgent job to do. They weren't even paying attention to her. So—

"I guess there's not much choice."

Right then and there, Ninym decided to carry out a very conspicuous ambush.

"Aaaargh?!"

Approaching the men wordlessly from behind, she grabbed one's arm and twisted it violently.

"Ow! Th-the hell?"

As soon as the man's eyes widened in confusion over what had just happened, Ninym swiftly took out her knife and pointed it at his neck.

"Don't resist."

Sensing the cool metal against his neck, the man forgot the pain in his shoulder and gulped. Once he was under control, Ninym turned to glare at the other man. "Step away from the gentleman."

"D-damn you…!"

"I told you to step away. Do you want your friend to die?"

Her forceful tone caused him to recoil, and he took one, then two steps away from the elder. Ninym pushed aside the man that she'd fixed her blade on and stepped between the two parties.

"Leave. There will be blood if you don't."

“Ngh. Y-you…”

“Let it go. She’s no amateur.”

Even fighting two against one didn’t guarantee their victory. And even if they did win, Ninym was right: Blood would be spilled. It wasn’t like she had the mettle to tolerate punks who tried to attack the old man and rob him of his possessions. The men spat verbal venom at her as they backed away.

When the two had completely disappeared, Ninym finally dropped her guard. “Are you hurt?”

The elderly man shook his head. His filmy white eyes turned to Ninym, and he slowly nodded. “…Because you stepped in. You have my thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “It seems this place is lawless. I apologize if I’m just being paranoid, but I suggest you avoid walking by yourself.”

“…I stroll these areas around this time each morning, though I normally take the less-traveled paths.”

“I see. It seems your spontaneity has led to a bit of bad luck.”

“No, *that’s not it*.” Power seeped into his voice. “I am never spontaneous. I did use a different road than usual today, which caused me to be stopped by those hooligans when you appeared…”

The old man closed his eyes, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Just as Ninym wondered what she should do, he spoke to her.

“Don’t you have a duty to fulfill? Go on. Someone is coming for me shortly, so there is no need to worry.”

“…In that case, I will take my leave. Pardon me.”

Although she wasn’t fully satisfied, Ninym couldn’t deny she had matters to take care of.

The old man called out to her, and she turned on her heel.

“Those who stir storms are not alone. Do beware. Disaster is soon upon us __”

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“Hmm, what a strange old man.”

Wein seemed indifferent after Ninym told him what had happened.

“You don’t really seem to care.”

“Well, we are on the home turf of the biggest religion on the continent. They’ve got quacks in spades. Plus, you’re not hurt… For me, the bigger

problem is what Falanya told me about Felite."

"I think it's unfair to say 'quacks' rule this town… Anyway, I'm worried about the issue with Patura, too."

Wein groaned as Ninym nodded next to him. "I understand what he's asking and how we got to this point, but what am I supposed to do…?"

"I admit it's troubling. But Wein…" Ninym pointed in front of her. "You should be focusing on *this* right now."

It was nighttime. They were standing in front of the abandoned building Ninym had investigated early that morning. Wein, Tigris, and a third person were about to have their secret meeting.

"You're right, Ninym. This is just as important," he replied.

"We have been expecting you." From the darkness emerged the face and voice of Tigris's servant, Fushto.

"Where's Tigris?"

"He is farther inside. There is also one more attendee," he said. "Master Tigris insists you enter the manor alone. Your guard must wait outside."

Ninym scowled at this demand, but Wein stayed her with his hand.

"All right, I'm fine with that. Lead the way."

Wein left Ninym—stewing in displeasure—and entered the derelict building alone.

The inside was dim. There wasn't a single lit candle in the room; the moonlight peeking through the holes in the walls provided some illumination. The shadows of the key figures, however, were nowhere to be seen.

"Tigris?" Wein called out into the darkness. After a moment, a reply came from above.

"Hey there, Prince."

Wein looked up and spotted a second-floor mezzanine. Tigris's head appeared from over the edge of the corridor.

"What are you doing up there?" Wein asked.

"Our third member is being a little stubborn. I was trying to persuade them."

"'Persuade them'? Of what?"

"To be honest, even though you and I are on the same page, this individual is the cautious type."

"…Wait. Are you saying you haven't finished negotiating with them this late in the game?"

“Hey, at least they’re here. I can tell it’ll take one last push. Just wait a minute, I’ll bring ’em out soon.”

As if running away from the complaints Wein was about to unleash, Tigris’s head instantly vanished. Left alone in the dark, Wein had no choice but to wait in dissatisfaction.

Then, a while later…

“Hm?”

He thought he heard a commotion from above. Just as he looked toward the source, a strange noise echoed over his head—the sound of something crashing with the rusty chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

“Wha—?”

The chain of the chandelier snapped in front of Wein and came crashing to the ground. The chains clanked. Dust kicked up. Glass shards sliced across the moonlight and twinkled like stars. When everything had settled, Wein’s eyes immediately shot open.

“Tigris…?!”

There splayed on top of the fallen chandelier lay Tigris’s body.

“Hey, are you okay?!” Wein rushed over to him and grabbed his shoulder. Moments later, he froze.

There was blood.

Even in the darkness, he could clearly see Tigris was losing blood. It stained his clothes, and his body looked as if he were being swallowed up by the night.

It didn’t take long for Wein to discover he was dead. The cause of death was either blood loss from the laceration in his neck or the knife stabbing through his heart from the back. The man’s lifeless eyes gripped his chest tightly, and Wein was forced to accept that he was now a silent corpse.

“Your Highness! What happened?!”

Hearing the commotion, Ninym and Fushto came flying in. Their eyes shot open when they found Wein and Tigris, fallen on the ground.

“Your Highness! Are you hurt?!”

“Master Tigris?! Wh-what’s going on?!”

Ninym ran to Wein and Fushto to Tigris. Upon confirming the conditions of their two masters, their expressions were direct opposites of one another.

“Wh-what happened here…? Wh-why did this…?” Fushto’s lips trembled. Grief and confusion had set in his eyes, but his face soon twisted to

one of rage.

"Prince Wein! What's going on?!"

It was a natural reaction, but Wein could only shake his head.

"Calm down. I don't know what's going on either."

"How could you not know?! Master Tigris is dead! And you say you don't know?!"

Fushto tried to close in on him; Ninym stepped between them. Sweat beaded on her temple.

"Sir Fushto, please do not approach Prince Wein any closer or I will have to restrain you."

"Know your place, woman! Prince Wein! Answer me! What happened here?! Is this your doing?!"

"Stand back, Your Highness! Sir Fushto, if you take so much as one more step, I will consider you an enemy…!"

"Quit it! Now's not the time for that!" Wein was shouting to pacify the two when…

"—No one move!"

The three all looked toward the manor entrance. Standing there were several dozen armed men. They weren't rogues; each wore the same matching uniform.

"We are the defense force of Lushan!" one man announced. "We received a report that suspicious figures were spotted in this area! Resistance is futile! Follow our orders!"

"——Ngh." Wein looked uneasy.

The secret meeting. Tigris's sudden death. The calculated appearance of Lushan's guards. By this point, there was no room for doubt.

This was a setup—!

As soon as this thought struck him, Wein came to a decision. "Ninym!"

"This way!"

Instantly understanding what he wanted, Ninym launched herself off the ground. He followed her deeper into the building without hesitation.

"Wait! Where are you going?!"

"You won't get away! After them!"

As the voices of Fushto and the guards called out from behind, the two bounded farther into the shadows.

"Shit! Why'd this happen?!"

“It looks like you’ve been tricked, Wein…!”

“Yeah, no kidding!”

If this was a trap, they had to avoid getting caught at any cost. And even if they did manage to escape, the situation was guaranteed to go from bad to worse.

After taking this all into account—Wein unveiled an arrogant smile.

“I don’t know who’s pulling the strings, but I promise I’ll get even with the mastermind…!”

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The Holy Elite Tigris was assassinated.

Even though an official announcement was never made, rumors spread through the city like wildfire. *Why? Who? How?* —Speculations squirmed like a living creature, and overnight, Lushan’s celebratory mood as it awaited the Gathering of the Chosen was replaced by a city crawling with dark whispers.

Of course, there were those who laughed off the rumors. Nonetheless, when they noticed the castle gates blockaded by guards and the heightened security around the manors housing the leaders, starting with Tigris’s estate, they had to admit something was going on.

“Tell me this isn’t so…”

It didn’t take long before the gathered leaders in Lushan heard about Prince Wein’s involvement in Tigris’s death.

“Father! I have urgent news!”

One such person, Tolcheila, received a report from her subordinate and wasted no time rushing to tell Gruyere.

“Prince Tigris has been killed, and they say it was Prince Wein’s doing!”

“I know.” Gruyere sat in a room of his manor and greeted the flustered Tolcheila with a tiny smile. “He just told me himself.”

“Huh?” Tolcheila stared at him blankly before noticing a figure sitting there. Her eyes widened with recognition. “P-Prince Wein?!”

“Ah, Princess Tolcheila. What a coincidence.”

It was, without a doubt, Wein Salema Arbalest in the flesh. How could he call this a “coincidence”? He was the criminal wanted throughout Lushan for Tigris’s murder. He stood at the very center of this scandal. Why would he

come to *their* manor?

"He sought refuge here last night. Said to call it payback for the other day," Gruyere said, sensing Tolcheila's doubt. "I accepted without any idea about what was going on. Who would have thought you were caught up in such a mess? I would have kicked you out if I'd known."

"IOUs are a man's best friend."

"Hah, negotiating with you comes with deadly consequences," Gruyere replied with a laugh. "So did you do it?"

"I would never."

Gruyere gazed up at the ceiling, appearing bored. "I thought you might have offed Tigris since you'd clash in the future anyway."

"I'm not that aggressive, King Gruyere."

"Oh? Didn't you get rid of Ordalasse of Cavarin?"

"Quite an accusation. Wasn't it officially determined that General Levert did the deed?"

The two spoke casually, except the atmosphere was anything but.

Tolcheila stepped in. "If the prince didn't slay Tigris, then who did?"

"An excellent question. The biggest suspect is the third person who was present, too."

The third party whom Tigris had invited to the deserted house. One person was the murder victim and the other was Wein, so presuming the final individual was the culprit made perfect sense.

"Who could they be…?" Wein wondered with a frown.

Across from him, Gruyere groaned. "You never found out who it was?"

"No, but from Tigris's attitude, they were apparently at the scene."

"Sounds like you've got it rough," Gruyere commented. "You're free to hide here, Prince Wein, but don't hang around forever. I just got word that the Gathering will be postponed, but that'll be a few days at most. If you don't find Tigris's real killer before then…"

"I'll become the criminal."

"Exactly."

After all, a Holy Elite invited to the Gathering of the Chosen had died in Lushan. If they weren't careful, it might bring on more chaos: like Tigris's homeland of Velancia separating from Levetia or rising in revolt. From Levetia's perspective, they had to publicly blame someone—guilty or not—and stamp out those sparks.

It would be easiest for them to pin the blame on me, since I'm the closest thing to a prime suspect. Claiming I killed a Holy Elite would give them an opportunity to strike at Natra.

To put it mildly, he was in trouble. And since Wein had only a few days to turn things around, this was doubly true.

"…I'd like to ask a few questions for reference. Can you think of anyone among the Holy Elite who bore a grudge against Prince Tigris?"

"I can. Knowing probably won't help on your quest to find your third person, though. Miroslav of Falcasso is one. He lost many of his soldiers after Tigris placed his men along the border of their two nations. It seems a treaty between Tigris and Agata of the Ulbeth Alliance has become strained, and apparently Tigris was trying to distance himself. There were rumors that he'd been secretly associating with the king of Vanhelio, who doesn't think too highly of Steel."

"It seems like Prince Tigris was spreading himself thin…"

"He couldn't keep a tight rein on the beast called ambition. I could have watched him forever, personally." Gruyere chuckled. "The Holy Elites are basically tied together. Agata keeps Levetia in check so he can control the Alliance and is in constant disagreement with the Agency of the Holy King. Miroslav's predecessor was a capable leader, so now he's met with opposition from every corner. You know, I've had diplomatic relations with the Vanhelio Kingdom in the past."

For both emotional and national interests, the Holy Elite were seen as a unit from the outside, but they were eager to crush one another at the first opportunity. Gruyere was saying that was what it meant to be a Holy Elite.

This isn't going to be easy, Wein thought.

As if reading his mind, Gruyere continued, "Just so you know, harboring you is the *only* help you'll get out of me."

"I understand. That's not to say you aren't up for making a deal, I take it?"

"If you can make it worth my while. Even I don't enjoy loaning money to a sinking ship."

"Well then, what may I ask would be worth your while, King Gruyere?"

Gruyere thought this over for a few seconds before looking at Tolcheila. "I guess I'd lend a hand if you agreed to marry Tolcheila. How about it?"

"Let's forget this conversation ever happened."

Gruyere could hardly contain his laughter as Tolcheila glared at Wein.

"Prince Wein, do you detest me that much?"

"No, not at all. It's just that I refuse to have King Gruyere as my father-in-law."

Unable to hold it in any longer, Gruyere slapped his belly with a loud guffaw.

"…You've secured your spot as my greatest adversary," Tolcheila snarled.

"It's fun to watch the trials and tribulations of youth, but there's no greater pleasure than undertaking your own. Go on, Tolcheila. I'm ready at any time."

Giving the father-daughter pair a side glance as they jokingly fought each other, Wein stared out the window.

I wonder how many clues I can gather in the time I have left…

That would all depend on his Heart secretly running across Lushan.

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"—How's the situation looking?"

In a corner of one of Lushan's multitude of empty alleyways, two hooded figures stood concealed within the shadows.

"His Highness is safe. He's currently staying at the manor for the representatives from Soljest." Ninym's red eyes peeked out from under her hood. "What about you, Nanaki?"

"Everyone's pretty much a mess—especially Falanya. Can't blame her, though," said the other figure. "I'm sure she'll calm down once I get back and tell her Wein's fine. That's only a temporary fix. The manor is surrounded by guards, and no one can enter or leave. If this keeps up, they'll explode sooner or later."

Having their master suspected of murder and being put under house arrest in an unfamiliar foreign country put a substantial amount of stress on the hearts and minds of the delegation.

"Then we'll have to resolve this as quickly as possible…but we still don't know who the third person is," Ninym remarked.

"I have a couple questions about that."

"I'm listening. What?"

“First, the guards moved way too fast. It felt that way when our manor was surrounded, but they also blockaded the city and stopped people from getting in or out in that same amount of time. They said it was to prevent the murderer from escaping, but it seemed like they’d prepared ahead of time.”

“There is a chance that they’re simply efficient…but it is worth noting.”

“I also did some digging before we met up and confirmed the locations of three of the Holy Elites on the night of the murder: Gruyere, Silverio, and Miroslav.”

“What did you learn?”

“I confirmed that Gruyere was at a party, Silverio at a ceremony, and Miroslav went to King Skrei’s manor. However, there’s a chance that Miroslav snuck out.”

“If we include Prince Miroslav, the remaining suspects are him, Duke Steel, and Representative Agata. Someone had to be in the abandoned building at that time. Furthermore—” Ninym took a cylindrical object out of her breast pocket. “I found this when I snuck inside. What do you think, Nanaki?”

“…Is it a knife sheath? It’s covered in dry blood… This carved symbol…”

“Belongs to the Ulbeth Alliance,” Ninym finished. “It’s the emblem of Agata’s city.”

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Ever since she lost track of Wein’s whereabouts, the word “calm” had vanished from Falanya’s vocabulary.

“Urghh…”

Moaning like a small animal, she wandered around her room like a ghost, sat down, thought for a minute, stood up, and paced the room again. She repeated this pattern, but it did nothing more than kill time. The delegation who saw her tried offering words of reassurance to set her mind at ease, but to no avail.

“Sirgis, isn’t Nanaki back yet?” she asked.

“I have not received any word,” he answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I see,” Falanya mumbled and continued roaming around the room. Sirgis observed her—and abruptly let out a quiet sigh.

“I thought you might return to your senses in due course, but it appears that is not the case.”

“What was that? Did you say something?”

Irritation sparked in his master’s gaze, but Sirgis boldly pressed on. “Regrettably, Your Highness, fret here all you like, but it will have no effect on Prince Wein’s return.”

“Hey…!” Falanya nearly lashed out at him. She swayed into a nearby chair. “…I know that,” she replied. “Are you saying I can’t worry about my brother?” she persisted with a pained expression.

“That’s right,” Sirgis shot back without a shred of mercy. “It may be virtuous when the townspeople are overcome with worry for their family and pray for their safety. You, however, are the princess of a nation, and now that Prince Wein is missing, you are the representative of this delegation. If you wish to follow through on your desire to support him, you must take up the task of leading our people here.”

“……”

His word pierced her heart. The silence stretched on. He, too, said nothing and continued to wait for the young girl sitting in front of him to take a new step forward.

“…Sirgis, please give me your opinion. What should I do? Give me the details.”

Her question was that of a representative, and Sirgis gave a reverent bow.

“First, you should take a warm, wet cloth and wipe your face. After that, please speak with each member of our delegation. A few words from you will unify everyone and allow us to face this dilemma.”

“…Yes, you’re right. I can’t let them see me like this.” Falanya smiled meekly. It was a grin that showed she was ready to take this on. “I must ready my hair and clothes. Sirgis, please call the maids.”

“Understood.” Sirgis accepted Falanya’s orders and left the room. He muttered to himself as he walked down the corridor.

“…To think I would be instructing children.” He broke into a self-deprecating smile, but it was quickly overshadowed. “Our problems start here. I wonder if that prince can turn the situation around…”

If the prince failed to return safely, even the princess’s resolve would crumble like sand. Of course, as he said a short while ago, no amount of worrying would change the situation.

Even so, Sirgis hoped the situation wouldn't leave the princess in tears.

Two days later, it was announced that the Gathering of the Chosen would resume.

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Deep within the Agency of the Holy King was a residence for royalty. The reception room inside it was perfectly round, and a circular table was set in the center. These two circles represented the symbol of Levetia. Since time immemorial, the villa had served as a customary meeting place for the Holy Elites.

There were currently seven people sitting around the table.

King Gruyere of Soljest Kingdom.

Prince Miroslav of Falcasso Kingdom.

Representative Agata of the Ulbeth Alliance.

Duke Steel of Vanhelio Kingdom.

Holy King Silverio.

Next to the Holy King, the director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau, Caldmellia.

And next to Prince Miroslav, the king of the Cavarin Kingdom, Skrei.

The leaders of the West had come together for the Gathering of the Chosen.

"—Welcome, everyone, I thank you for attending." Even in the spacious hall, Caldmellia's voice cut through the air like a knife. "I know we have had a bit of an accident, but I am grateful to have the chance to conduct this Gathering of the Chosen as the director of the Gospel Bureau."

The Holy Elites were apathetic.

"You're really going to call the death of a Holy Elite a little accident? Do they make you throw out all sanity and common sense when you become the director?" Miroslav asked with dripping sarcasm.

"It's the Gospel Bureau that is responsible for governing Lushan. You shouldn't diminish the death of a Holy Elite, Caldmellia."

Gruyere followed up on Miroslav's comment and gave her a challenging look. However, it would take more to shake Caldmellia.

“But of course. I feel as if Prince Tigris’s untimely passing in Lushan was my own personal failing. It pains me. However—if I may be so bold—such a matter is trivial compared to this Gathering of the Chosen.”

The eyes of the Holy Elite narrowed.

“What do you mean by ‘trivial,’ Lady Caldmellia?” Agata questioned.

Caldmellia offered an explanation. “As you all know, things are strained throughout the continent. Starting with the upheaval in the Empire, the embers of revolt now smolder in every nation. We cannot ignore the influence of the Eastern Levetia. That is why I believe the importance of our roles is unprecedently high.”

“…So you’re saying that the direction of this Gathering supersedes the life of a Holy Elite?”

“Precisely, Sir Agata. All Holy Elites dedicate themselves to the good of the people. Holding the Gathering of the Chosen is an act more important than fussing over this empty chair.”

“““……””

The Holy Elites remained silent. If they tossed out an immediate no here, it would look like they were prioritizing their own lives over the people’s. Everyone knew that wasn’t a great road to head down.

Caldmellia must have been expecting this reaction; she was beaming.

“Besides, we have an idea of who Prince Tigris’s murderer is.”

“…You mean the rumors about Prince Wein, right?” Steel asked dejectedly. “Could he really have killed Prince Tigris with his own hands?”

Miroslav scoffed. “He fled the scene, didn’t he? Plus, he’s still at large. How would claiming he’s innocent make any sense?!”

Agata quietly groaned. “…I’ve heard that no eyewitnesses caught him in the act, but what exactly happened, Lady Caldmellia?”

“You are correct, Sir Agata. From the account I have heard from Prince Tigris’s subordinate, Prince Tigris and Prince Wein met in an abandoned building, and the servant raced inside when he heard a strange noise. When he arrived, he found Prince Tigris dead and Prince Wein next to him.”

“Then the writing is on the wall!” Miroslav exclaimed. “It seems like the two were up to no good. Things fell through, and one ended up killing the other. That’s it. Let’s just hurry up and get on with the next topic!”

It was here that Gruyere interrupted with a smirk.

“The prince of Falcasso seems to be in quite the rush. It sounds to me like

arguing it further might be inconvenient for you."

"Wha…?! Don't be stupid! I'm saying we should talk about other stuff that actually matters instead of wasting our time stating the obvious! Or does the Beast King of the North not understand human logic?!"

"Do one of these topics you find so significant involve King Skrei sitting next to you? Ah, it's so tragic. Rather than mourning the death of a comrade, your biggest concern is filling his seat."

"Ngh, damn you…!" Miroslav began to argue, but Steel voiced a theory of his own.

"I wish to discuss it a bit further, too. Although Prince Tigris did not understand the arts, his soul was powerful. How was his glimmer stolen? How was it broken? If I can discover this, ah, I'm certain it will benefit my artistic process…!"

"…But even if we discuss it, what clues do we…"

As Agata spoke, Gruyere broke into a wide smile. "Don't worry on that point. It won't be long."

"Long before what?"

As the Holy Elites frowned, Holy King Silverio, who had been silent up until that point, suddenly turned toward the hall entrance. The door was pushed open, revealing a single person.

"—Oh, wonderful. Everyone's here. I have had the pleasure of meeting several of you before but allow me to introduce myself again."

With all eyes on him, their visitor grinned.

"I am the Crown Prince of Natra, Wein Salema Arbalest… I apologize for being late, but I am here to attend the Gathering of the Chosen."

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Wein should be showing up at the Gathering right about now.

Ninym let out a small sigh as she watched the Agency of the Holy King from a corner of an alley.

I've been collecting as much information as possible for the past several days and concluded the third person is almost certainly Agata… I just haven't been able to find any damning evidence.

At this rate, it would be difficult to justifiably denounce him. Their last option depended on Wein allying with the Holy Elites, the most powerful

figures in the West. They could make miracles happen. At the Gathering of the Chosen, the truth meant little. Everything depended on profit.

Ninym could only pray that Wein would demonstrate his knack at tricking others and lead them to the wrong conclusion.

But… Ninym recalled something that happened when the two had parted. After examining the information she'd gathered, Wein had asked her a single question.

I wonder why he asked that.

It was still a mystery to her. What value was there in that piece of information?

He'd asked, "How far was the hanging chandelier from the hallway on the second floor?"

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Wein had appeared out of nowhere. Miroslav was the next to react after Silverio.

"Bastard! How dare you show your face around here! Guards! Arrest him!"

As Miroslav tried to call for soldiers in a hoarse voice, Wein raised his hand in objection.

"Ah…Prince Miroslav, right? I regret to inform you that you don't have the power to mobilize soldiers here. And your orders to restrain me would be unfounded, I might add."

"Wha…?!"

"After all, this is the Agency of the Holy King, and the ones in charge are either the Holy King or the director of the Gospel Bureau. Plus, I was summoned to the Gathering of the Chosen by the Holy King himself and have confirmed the invitation still stands. Any problems?"

"Your invite is still valid," Caldmellia said with a wry grin. "So that's why you're here. It makes perfect sense. At the same time, you are a prime suspect in the murder of Prince Tigris. What do you think of that?"

Wein looked innocent as he seated himself at the round table. "It seems that there is a terrible misunderstanding going around. I'm shocked that would happen right before the Gathering."

"A misunderstanding? A misunderstanding, is it?!" Miroslav snapped at

Wein. “Prince Wein! Are you denying you killed Prince Tigris?!”

“Of course. I just happened to be there when he died. I wouldn’t dream of killing him.”

“Then answer me this! Who besides you could have killed him?!”

“That is—”

Wein looked over at Agata. As soon as that gaze fell on him, Agata froze as if pinned down. Satisfied by this reaction, Wein finished his thought.

“*An Imperial assassin*, of course.”

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“—An Imperial assassin, of course.”

When Agata heard Wein, he was more confused than relieved.

Did he realize that I’m the third person…?

The one whom Tigris had invited to meet in the abandoned manor…was Agata. Although the guards had focused on Wein and he’d just barely been able to make his own escape, it wasn’t like Agata had been able to cover up every shred of evidence. He thought that his cover would be blown if anyone did a bit of digging. That was why he had carefully crafted an excuse to use if he came under fire. Agata never expected to hear speculation that the Empire was involved.

...No, that’s not it.

Wein’s piercing gaze. The prince had to know he was the third person. But then why—

...Did he realize that, *too?!*

Agata watched Wein smirk.

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Yeah, that’s right.

Wein was certain now.

Even if the third person was Agata, there’s a chance that someone else killed Tigris…!

Wein had felt something was off from the very beginning. Whoever the

third person was, if they were going to secretly meet in an abandoned building, Tigris would have taken every precaution to guarantee his safety. And yet, he'd been ruthlessly killed. That could have never happened unless he was completely unguarded.

Moreover, a meeting between three people was the worst time to commit a crime. If, say, Wein had died, then either Tigris or Agata would be under suspicion, and if Agata had died, Tigris and Wein. Anyone who didn't die would automatically be presumed guilty. The secret died with Tigris, but if Wein somehow implicated Agata or gave a statement, he could quickly have him arrested. It would have been easier for Agata to meet with Tigris alone and kill him then.

Thus, this gave birth to a new possibility: An uninvited fourth person had been there.

"First, let me explain what I was doing inside a dilapidated manor that night." Keeping his inner thoughts to himself, Wein turned to the Holy Elites. "Before the Gathering of the Chosen, I had plans to attend a secret meeting proposed by Prince Tigris. His subordinate can attest to this."

Miroslav glowered at Wein. "And what were you going to talk about?"

"I'm not actually certain myself, but he did inform me that a third party would be attending. I'm afraid I was never given a name, however."

"You waltzed right into a meeting you knew nothing about? Hmph, Prince Wein—for all the praise I've heard about him—is more careless than I thought."

"Ah, well, yes. I wouldn't have been falsely implicated if I hadn't gone. I regret that." Wein brushed off Miroslav's sarcasm with a shrug. "Let's return to the subject at hand. I arrived at the manor at the proposed time. From atop the second floor, Prince Tigris told me he would bring down the third member and disappeared from sight. As I was waiting for him to return, Prince Tigris's dead body tumbled down from above."

Steel raised his hand. "Prince Wein, were you able to confirm the identity of the third person?"

"Regrettably, my only thought in that moment was to run toward the prince."

Miroslav was ready to pounce. "What a convenient excuse! Are you sure this third party even exists?!"

Caldmellia stepped in. "We have verbal testimony from Prince Tigris's

subordinate about that. Are you saying, Prince Wein, that this person was an assassin from the Empire?"

"That is correct."

This was, of course, all a lie. There was no Imperial assassin in the manor. The fourth member was, without question, a subordinate of a Holy Elite. And Wein knew the goal of whoever had sent them.

To kill one out of the three.

There was probably some degree of priority, but it didn't matter much. After all, the mastermind considered all three of them to be a nuisance. That said, they couldn't get rid of them all. Doing so would create more problems. And so they decided to kill one, have the other two framed for murder, and watch them crush each other. It didn't matter who was convicted, because the fourth person would profit either way—

—That was the gist of your plan*. Right, Caldmellia?*

The director of the Gospel Bureau. Caldmellia. Wein was certain she was the one who had snuck in that fourth figure.

Obviously, I'm a threat to Levetia, Tigris was eyeing the Holy King's throne, and Agata fights with the Agency of the Holy King over the administration of his city.

For Caldmellia, all three were better off dead. That's why their late-night meeting was a stroke of good luck for her.

Lushan is her home turf. It wouldn't be weird at all for her to know about our meeting in the abandoned building and any connected hidden routes or secret rooms. And she can dispatch guards to the scene at a moment's notice. Caldmellia has to be the one who sealed off the city.

Wein mentally grinned.

Why could Ninym sneak in and find a sheath with Agata's blood on it? Why was security so lax? Because no one found it even after a thorough search? Yeah, right.

Everything was a setup designed to pit Wein and Agata against each other. Caldmellia must have also known that Wein would hide out in Gruyere's mansion. And she was the one who let him go free.

"Prince Wein, if you didn't see the third person yourself, how do you know they were an Imperial assassin?" Gruyere asked with a chuckle. As someone who had an idea of what was going on, he must have thought this conspiracy theory was hilarious.

“It’s simple. Why was I chosen to attend the meeting? And who would benefit from Prince Tigris’s death? When you combine these two questions, the answer is quite clear.”

“What do you mean?”

“—It was to join forces with the Empire and win over my nation to form a pro-Empire faction among the Holy Elite. That was Prince Tigris’s goal.”

The table stirred. The Empire was technically an enemy to the West. Of course, they were a valuable trading partner for neighboring nations, but it was understood that such business was done on the sly.

“I see. That’s certainly possible. After all, he was always stepping on the toes of other Holy Elites. He must have thought he was friendless, hoping to claw his way out of trouble by connecting with the Empire,” Gruyere murmured in admiration.

Wein was, of course, making things up on the fly. The reality was, however, that it was completely plausible that Tigris might try to contact the Empire. That was precisely what made these lies so believable.

“Siding with the Empire is high treason! It’s unforgivable!” Miroslav railed.

Of the three public highways within the large mountain range running down the central continent, the nation facing the southern road was Miroslav’s kingdom. Inevitably, they had a bitter history with the Empire. To Miroslav, the Empire was an accursed enemy.

Wein pressed on. “Prince Tigris’s plan, however, was a tragic failure. He was betrayed and killed by the very state he meant to form an alliance with.”

“I don’t understand that part,” Caldmellia interjected. “Regardless of whether it would prove successful, why did the Empire want to crush any budding hope of a pro-Empire faction?”

“A poor move in the long run, but the current situation in the Empire is so volatile that they can’t even consider a long-term outlook. To prevent others from taking advantage of them, the Empire has chosen to avoid conflict and maintain stable relations with the West in the short term,” Wein replied. “There is also a reason why they carried out an assassination in Lushan. With the Gathering of the Chosen as their stage, they could undermine the authority of the Holy Elite. They hoped to bring down a figure of import such as Lady Caldmellia. The Imperial family, Princess Lowellmina in particular, is evil incarnate, born from depravity and cowardice. Conjuring up this idea

would be as simple to her as breathing."

If Lowellmina were present, she'd scream at the top of her lungs and bash him with a mirror, so he could take a long, hard look at himself. Since she wasn't here, however, Wein placed the blame on her.

If the group accepted this conspiracy theory, Tigris would be known as the idiot who tried to make a deal with the Empire and failed, and his reputation would plummet. But Wein couldn't care less. Dead people didn't need reputations. And more than anything, this was for Tigris's sake, too.

When the body fell with the chandelier, something felt off. I had Ninym do a little digging and figured it out… Tigris, you jumped on to the chandelier yourself.

Since he fell from the edge of the second-floor mezzanine, the chandelier decorating the entrance hall of the abandoned house would have been unreachable following a natural trajectory. Unless Tigris launched himself off the edge or three or four people tossed him, he never would have touched it, and Wein would have sensed if multiple people were right above him.

Which could only mean that Tigris jumped. But for what?

It was to prove that, until the very moment he jumped, he had been conscious.

Tigris had his throat slashed and a knife stuck in his back. There's no question he was ambushed, and his throat was slit first.

What was running through Tigris's mind as the shock gripped his throat? Surprise? Confusion? Fear? Anger? None of that. Wein knew.

What Tigris held on to was stubbornness.

Realization had hit Tigris. There was a fourth person. Someone sent by Caldmellia. That's why Tigris ran. He ran to where Wein was waiting for him below so he could tell him about the unexpected visitor.

This was not done out of friendship or their shared alliance. It was a final act of obstinance that refused to let Caldmellia win and get away with it. He couldn't speak because of his slit throat, and there was a knife in his back. Refusing to give up, however, Tigris jumped just before his death. He gripped his heart tightly.

If his slit throat and the knife in his back were not the cause of this pain, why did he clutch at his chest? It wasn't because he was hurt. What he was actually holding was the symbol that hung from his neck—the Circles. It was a final message that said the enemy was someone who was a symbol for

Levetia. That is, the Holy King and Caldmellia.

Tigris, we would have killed each other at some point if you had lived, but for better or worse, you died while our alliance was still intact… So I'll pick a flower to leave on your grave.

It was for this reason that Wein was going to put the pressure on.

"What do you think, Sir Agata? Is my explanation to your satisfaction?"

"Hmph…" Agata slightly flinched when he was thrown into the conversation. Miroslav, Steel, and the others looked at them quizzically.

Agata alone was aware of the prince's unspoken intentions: *I'll pretend you weren't the third person, so just play along.*

"…I feel like much of what you have said is far-fetched," Agata began. "But only God knows. We will never know the truth… I shall believe you."

Wein could feel the atmosphere of the room begin to shift. It didn't make too much of a difference, though—there was one less Holy Elite. A single "yes" wasn't going to do much.

Wein turned his eyes on his next target. "What do you think, Prince Miroslav?"

"Don't be stupid! All I've been hearing this whole time is stuff that makes you look better! You think I'd just fall for it?!"

Miroslav was, in fact, right on the money, but Wein answered him with confidence.

"I can't blame you for thinking this way, but both my reputation and the future of Natra are on the line. If you insist on proving I murdered Prince Tigris, I will take as much time as needed to clear such accusations."

Miroslav's main objective for this Gathering was making King Skrei a Holy Elite. Finding Tigris's murderer was not part of his plans. Wein was in his way. The young prince maintained open relations with his enemy—the Empire—and Miroslav understood there was merit in getting ridding of him, but only if it wouldn't obstruct his true goal.

If we waste time on this and miss the chance to talk about King Skrei's candidacy for Holy Elite…

Miroslav was spearheading the discussion around King Skrei. It wouldn't make much difference to the other Holy Elites if they skipped talk of his appointment altogether. In fact, they were all thinking about shrugging it off. There were more important matters at hand.

Grah…

Should he continue verbally denouncing Wein or switch topics to King Skrei? Miroslav's heart was as stormy as the ocean.

"Prince Miroslav."

The voice next to him brought Miroslav back to his senses. Beside him, Skrei's gaze was intense, though apprehensive.

If I interrogate Wein here, I'll lose his trust…!

By cooperating with Skrei, Miroslav's main objective was to gain more power at the Gathering of the Chosen. Even if Skrei did become a Holy Elite, the plan would collapse if he criticized Wein here and lost Skrei's trust. Miroslav had to avoid this at any cost.

I guess I've got no choice…

Cursing himself on the inside, Miroslav turned to Wein. "…I take it back. I'll accept it was the Empire's fault."

"Oh, I'm glad you understand, Prince Miroslav." Wein smirked as if he'd just watched Miroslav's inner turmoil.

Miroslav grit his teeth in irritation.

If that's the case… Wein surveyed the remaining Holy Elites at the round table.

There were four left: the Holy King, Caldmellia, Steel, and Gruyere. If Wein could convince even one of them, his conspiracy theory would be accepted by the majority.

Personality-wise, Gruyere will agree to this only if he's the sole opposition. The Holy King and Caldmellia are still sticking to their guns. Which means Steel is the one to convince!

Wein opened his mouth to address Steel.

"—Prince Wein, your theory about the Empire is certainly a logical one." Before he could say anything, Caldmellia broke her silence. "We should protest to the Empire and have them take responsibility."

Caldmellia had accepted Wein's theory. None of the Holy Elites had been expecting this. They had assumed she was planning to take full advantage of the chaos and crush Natra.

"I take it His Holiness shares the same opinion, Director Caldmellia?" Gruyere asked.

Next to Caldmellia, Silverio gave a small but definite nod. She was not deciding things on her own, it seemed.

"King Gruyere, Duke Steel, what do you think?" Caldmellia asked the

two in Wein's stead. They were already in the minority, and there was no way either was going to refute Wein's opinion if the Holy King already agreed with it.

"Prince Wein, will you later inform me of Tigris's death in minute detail?"

"…Of course."

"Thank you. In that case, I will support the notion that Prince Tigris was killed by the Empire," Steel said in a satisfied tone. Wein mentally gagged.

"All right. I'll accept it, too," Gruyere added with a heavy nod.

With this, the truth would be buried in darkness. Wein's proposed theory was accepted by all the Holy Elites, and the crime of Tigris's death would fall on the Empire. In other words, Wein had wriggled his way out of all his problems.

I should be home free—but I'm not.

Wein looked at Caldmellia. Why did she agree to his story? He couldn't relax until he figured this out.

Wein kept his expression composed. *I see what you're up to. Your plan is to get me to join in and bash the Empire, right?*

The Holy Elite Tigris had been killed by an Imperial assassin.

News of this would spread across both sides of the continent and be a catalyst for heightened anti-Imperial sentiment in the West. It wasn't hard to imagine future meetings, where strategies to put pressure on the Empire would be discussed. Naturally, Natra couldn't afford to stay out of it.

Will she use military force or impose economic sanctions? At any rate, she's using this as an opportunity to get Natra to cut ties with the Empire. And now that I've pushed the Empire as the mastermind, it would be awkward for me to refuse her now.

He still had a chance, however. He'd gotten this far. Wein could be a fair-weather friend.

The real battle starts now, Caldmellia…!

Just as Wein was staring to get ready for the fight ahead…

"—Pardon me!" A messenger came flying out of nowhere.

"The army of Cavarin is attacking the city of Mealtars in the central continent! And Imperial Prince Bardloche has mobilized his army to defend Mealtars!"

""Whaaaaaat?""

The eyes of all present widened in shock. This, of course, included the Holy Elites. Wein and Skrei were no exceptions.

Two among them, however, were different.

The Holy King remained perfectly still as if he'd heard nothing at all, and a suspicious smile crept onto Caldmellia's face—

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Imperial Prince Bardloche of Earthworld was famous for being the militaristic type. He'd enjoyed learning swordsmanship from a young age, and it was his greatest desire to have his own army once he grew up. Whether it was leading subordinates or subjugating bandits, no one had more battle experience within the Imperial family than him. His soldiers trusted him with their lives, and many believed Bardloche was worthy of the throne.

And yet he'd lost the other day.

It all started when the eldest prince acted recklessly. The four siblings had fought for the right to rule, and in the end, Imperial Princess Lowellmina got the jump on all of them. Although Lowellmina's coronation was on hold at the moment, Bardloche's force had sustained major damage because of his failure. The civil war had cost him soldiers and supplies to no small degree, and his faction took a nosedive.

Bardloche had to rebuild his faction as fast as possible. Curiously, that was the case, too, for Princess Lowellmina and the youngest prince, Manfred, but unlike them, Bardloche's faction was tied together by military strength.

Bardloche was strong. His armies were strong. That was why people flocked to him. They respected him. They supported him. It was a simple system, and that was how Bardloche liked it.

This was also why his losses in battle felt so much more devastating than the other Imperial siblings.

Bardloche had been weak. His army had failed. Respect had turned to disappointment, and doubt rattled his support base. He would be criticized as a coward if he tried to buy back support with money, and the people would think he was abandoning his roots if he made any attempt to regain their hearts with speeches. Those admired for their strength had no choice but to

regain respect with strength and strength alone.

I need something that will shut the people up and an enemy I can take on. But where…?

Bardloche was unsure what to do, beating himself up, when a messenger from the West arrived—

"Your Highness, it won't be long until we reach Mealtars."

When his subordinate Lorencio spoke to him, Bardloche opened his eyes, riding on horseback. He looked at Lorencio and the soldiers proceeding forward in an orderly fashion. There were around three thousand of them. It was the best he was able to scrape together from his exhausted faction.

"…How's the city?"

"According to the reports from our scouting party, Mealtars closed off the western castle gate. It seems Cavarin is observing them from a distance and has ceased its attacks."

"I see… Everything's going according to plan," Bardloche muttered.

Lorencio grimaced.

"Does something bother you, Lorencio?"

"Forgive me. This strategy just doesn't seem like you, Your Highness. Even if it was, it's a nasty one."

"Yeah…I guess you're right."

The messenger from the West said they were a subordinate of Caldmellia's. They had come to Bardloche with a proposition.

"We will provoke a portion of the aristocrats in Cavarin and attack Mealtars. We want you to raise your army and defend the city."

At first, Bardloche couldn't decipher their plan. After he got the whole story, however, he understood.

Caldmellia had two objectives in mind. First, she wanted to stop King Skrei from becoming a Holy Elite. If Cavarin attacked the Empire, he would have to take responsibility. His consideration to join the Holy Elite would be taken off the table, and he would be denounced domestically and abroad. Who could say how much chaos would ensue in an already fractured country? Cavarin would be ripe for the picking by neighboring nations.

Her other goal was to force Natra to align with the West. After inviting

Wein to the Gathering of the Chosen, she would stage a clash between the two sides of the continent. He would then be pressured to pick a side. If he complied, great. If he chose the East, Caldmellia would have reason to crush him.

This plan benefited Bardloche, too. Defending Mealtars would let him highlight his former military prowess. Working together would guarantee a fresh stream of supplies. And most importantly—there was the tempting possibility that Natra would side with the West.

If Natra joins them, he'll have to break it off with Lowellmina.

Natra was currently in an alliance with the Empire, but it was really Imperial Princess Lowellmina's people whom they were supporting. It was obvious that her foreign backer had stabilized her faction. If she lost him, it would be a hard hit on the princess.

Not a bad deal… In fact, I couldn't ask for better.

He couldn't turn down such an offer. It was a win all around.

At the same time, Bardloche was worried it was *too* good to be true. Was this really a safe bet? He'd heard Director Caldmellia of the Gospel Bureau was a mastermind. What if she was hiding another objective he just couldn't see?

But…

At the moment, the other two factions had a lead over him. If Bardloche stood around and watched, the throne would slip through his fingers. If he wanted any chance of staying in the race, he would grasp at anything that came his way.

"Lorencio, I understand why you're worried. But it's too late to hesitate."

"Yes… Forgive me."

"We'll deploy the soldiers as soon as we reach Mealtars. Those Westerners thought they could invade Imperial territory, but we're gonna drive 'em right out."

Lorencio listened to Bardloche, closed his eyes, and bowed.

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On the west side of Mealtars, Cavarin's army of aristocrats set out in a place away from the city's blockaded gate. There weren't even two thousand of them. They were poorly equipped, and their morale was low. It was like they

were a reflection of Cavarin's current state of affairs.

A man and a woman observed this army from the rear.

"Seems things are chugging along."

"No surprise there. Lady Caldmellia came up with the plan, after all."

The man's name was Owl. The woman was Ibis. Both served under Caldmellia.

"I really didn't think it'd be this easy to get them going. The merchants from Mealtars must have milked those aristocrats from Cavarin for everything they were worth."

Mealtars was a critical position in the central continent, and as a neighboring nation, Cavarin had flourished from its founding. However, after King Ordalasse's assassination two years prior and losing the ensuing war with Natra, the reputation of the royal family had gone down the drain. This stirred the top leaders to fight for the title of king. The race for the throne carried on both publicly and privately, and the nation's public order, manufacturing industries, and distribution chains fell apart in the process.

It was impossible for the aristocrats to run their domains and the economy. Tax revenue dropped, and their popularity among the people waned.

Just then, the merchants from Mealtars approached them, offering people, supplies, and money to aid their administrations. Most jumped at the opportunity. There were some who realized the merchants' objective and hesitated. The trouble over managing their lands, however, wouldn't go away on its own. In the end, they yielded.

Thus, the domains of aristocrats all fell under the patronage of the merchants. Like a cloth stripped back layer by layer, their rights were peeled away.

It wasn't only the West that was ready to prey on Cavarin in its weakened state. By the time the aristocrats realized this, it was already too late. They could do nothing but obey the merchants while harboring shame and resentment.

Caldmellia took advantage of this moment.

"She claims to lead them to the promised land if their attack on Mealtars is worthwhile. Do you really think that's true?"

"Yes. A place will be prepared for them. By God's side."

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Ibis chuckled. “I feel bad for King Skrei. The aristocrats have betrayed him while he’s trying to unify the country, and the masterminds forcing him to take responsibility are about to meet our Creator. What is to become of Cavarin?”

“Who knows? It doesn’t matter to us. All I can say is you needn’t pity King Skrei. After all, there is no greater honor than becoming a pawn to one of Lady Caldmellia’s plans.”

“Hee-hee. You have a point.” Ibis giggled and looked west in the direction of Lushan.

“I’m sure the Holy Elites gathered in the city are weeping tears of joy right about now,” she said.

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“—That damn woman! Caldmellia screwed me over!”

In a room of his lodgings in Lushan, Miroslav cursed Caldmellia with every word in his vocabulary.

Mealtars had been violently attacked by aristocrats from Cavarin, and Prince Bardloche’s army was advancing. The influx of this new information forced them to temporarily pause the Gathering of the Chosen.

Were the reports real? If they were, what were the details of the situation? Each of the Holy Elites had called upon their subordinates and raced to get the facts straight as quickly as possible. When the messengers returned with their findings several days later, they confirmed everything was true.

This is definitely a plan to stop Skrei from becoming a Holy Elite!

The puppet master had to be someone at the Gathering, and there was no one more suspicious than Caldmellia. Now that Miroslav thought about it, the city had been instantly blockaded after Tigris’s death. He had thought it was to prevent the criminal from getting away, but it also could have been an effort to prevent any information from coming in or going out. Even if external news arrived in Lushan by some chance, the Holy Elites would have no idea what was going on in Mealtars. By the time they did find out, everything would be far too late. The only ones with the power to execute such a thing were either the Holy King or Caldmellia.

“I can’t believe this is happening…”

In the same room, Skrei—visibly overwhelmed—murmured to himself.

This just had to happen as he'd been thinking he could unify Cavarin by becoming a king and a Holy Elite. Even he couldn't pick himself up.

"Get a grip, Skrei! It'll be over if you fall apart here!"

Miroslav's comment did nothing to clear Skrei's dark expression.

"But, Miroslav, things won't get any better. I should go back to Cavarin and settle things there."

"No! You can't do that!" Miroslav grabbed Skrei's shoulders. "You heard Wein, right? Holy Elites can make miracles happen if we want to. And there's no denying Cavarin attacked first. If you leave the Gathering now, the Holy Elites will take advantage of that and criticize Cavarin. They'll try to destroy your country and devour it without a second thought. If nothing else, you've gotta avoid that!"

"But how?!"

"By becoming a Holy Elite!" Miroslav shouted. "We're out of options by this point. Leave Cavarin to your vassals for now. In the meantime, all you can do is become a Holy Elite, purge all the aristocrats who had anything to do with the attack on Mealtars, and stabilize Cavarin! If you do that, the other Elites can't get in your way!"

Miroslav knew he was asking for a lot. He was trying to get the rest of the Holy Elites to accept Cavarin into their fold even though everyone except him saw the country as easy prey. But it simply had to be done. Miroslav couldn't say any of this to Skrei's face, but it would still be to his benefit even if Cavarin got swallowed up by another Western nation. What worried Miroslav most was the possibility of the Empire advancing into the West.

The Empire is eyeing Cavarin, too, in its weakened state! The Imperial merchants from Mealtars have poached aristocratic land, and now the nobility are attacking Mealtars to exact their revenge! The Empire has more than enough reason to invade Cavarin to protect their interests!

That alone was unacceptable. The Kingdom of Falcasso—a territory that managed the southern road connecting to the East—had a long history of fighting against the Empire. To Miroslav, the Empire was an enemy that had to be destroyed at any cost. They could *not* be allowed to cross into the West.

...If there's any silver lining here, I guess it would be the fact that Wein's getting cornered.

Caldmellia would use this opportunity to win over Natra. It was critical for the West that the prince break ties with the Empire. In fact, it would be

even better if he defied the Elites. Once Wein was labeled a traitor, the attention would shift away from Skrei.

Either way, it works, Miroslav thought. *Your days of neutrality are over. You're out of moves. Time to pick a side—!*

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"—There's more where that came from," Wein confirmed from his temporary manor.

"'More'… Are you saying there's still something we can do?" Ninym asked, shocked.

Just as Wein had successfully cleared himself of Tigris's murder and figured he could quietly head back home, Mealtars was under attack. They didn't even have time to catch their breath, much less celebrate. Understandably, Ninym thought all hope was lost—but her master apparently had other plans.

"Yeah. There's no question we can wrap this up while still keeping everything vague and not getting a single thing done."

It's a long shot, though, Wein thought. Even if he'd had all the time in the world to prepare, he wasn't completely sure it would work. Plus, there were too many variables in their current situation.

"I'll need time to put this plan together. How can we stall 'em…?" Wein wondered.

Ninym agonized for a moment. "For now, I'll bring tea and snacks. They've finally agreed on what happened to Prince Tigris. We've all earned a break."

"Yeah, you're right. If we do that—" Wein started, when a knock came at the door.

"Pardon me, Your Highness. A letter has just arrived."

A subordinate held out the missive. When Ninym accepted it, a look of surprise flashed across her features. She passed it to Wein.

"This is…"

Looking at the wax seal, Wein understood why Ninym was so confounded. He broke it and read over its contents in a matter of seconds.

"Hold off on the tea, Ninym," he said with a grin.

"And call Falanya here."

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Elsewhere, Falanya was sitting across from Cosimo in a reception room.

"I am terribly sorry that I could not assist in Prince Wein's dilemma despite your assistance to me in the past. I must apologize that I need to depart these lands with hardly a farewell."

"Please think nothing of it, Mayor Cosimo. It was not under your control, and the charges against my brother have been cleared."

Falanya gave a modest smile as Cosimo bowed his head. A mayor did not have grounds to say anything about the assassination of a Holy Elite.

Furthermore, Falanya's lodgings had been surrounded by guards who wouldn't allow a single person passage. Even if Cosimo could have done something, there was no question that his visit would only create more issues.

Plus, just as he was thanking the heavens that Wein had been cleared of suspicion, Cosimo was tossed in the fire. Although there was clearly no time for good-byes, he had managed to carve out a few moments anyway.

"On to more important topics, Mayor Cosimo. What's happening in Mealtars…?"

"An army led by Prince Bardloche has already entered the city and is currently defending it…or so I hear."

Cosimo's expression soured. Mealtars primarily functioned as an autonomous city of merchants, but now they were being attacked by the West and had allowed the Imperial army to stand guard within its walls. One might see the situation as an affront on Mealtars's independence.

"I was aware that the aristocrats in Cavarin were growing resentful, but to think they would go this far… If I had been present, perhaps we could have avoided disaster at the last minute…"

Falanya had heard from Wein that Caldmellia was behind all this. If that was the case, the director had likely factored in Cosimo's absence from the city in her calculations.

"…I wonder what will become of Mealtars," Falanya said.

"Now that they have attacked our city, I have no choice but to insist the fault lies with Cavarin. I am hoping for a swift resolution."

It was easier said than done. Cavarin resented Mealtars, and Prince Bardloche was using this opportunity to flex his power. It wouldn't be easy to stop everything. Cosimo sweat at the mere thought of it.

“If there is anything I can do…”

“Your kindness is more than enough. Unfortunately, Natra is still in a difficult situation even though Prince Wein’s name has been cleared. Princess Falanya, you should direct your efforts toward aiding your homeland.”

Cosimo was right. Falanya had heard that once the Gathering was back in session, Natra would be pressured to choose a side. Wein seemed intent on bypassing this step, but Falanya didn’t have the slightest idea how. Not only that, she was starting to come to terms with her own weakness and the truth that diplomacy was a war fought with more than swords.

A knock came at the door.

“Pardon me, Princess Falanya… Ah, I see you are still here as well, Mayor Cosimo. Excellent timing.”

Sirgis was before them. He had holed himself up in his room to mull over his thoughts; his sudden appearance had to signal he was finished.

“Do you have business with me, Sirgis?”

“Yes. I have finally finished gathering my thoughts,” he replied. “I believe you are both already aware of the situation in Mealtars. —Princess Falanya, Mayor Cosimo. I have a proposal for you.”

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Several days passed since the news about Mealtars broke. Lushan was in a panicked state of uncertainty. The citizens had been thrilled when it was announced that the Gathering of the Chosen would be held in their fair city. That all changed, however, with Prince Tigris’s death and the outbreak of war in Mealtars. They had no clue what was going on anymore.

“What will become of us…?” asked the people. No one across the land could provide an answer.

After all, the Gathering was about to resume, and the answer depended on its outcome—

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Wein had been the topic at the previous session of the Gathering of the Chosen, but the meeting on this day was different. Although the same members were in attendance, the Holy Elites’ attention was now on Skrei.

"…I understand that the incident in Mealtars has happened. A portion of the aristocrats from my country have attacked the city, and the Imperial army has stepped in to defend it," Skrei said gravely. He had underlined his own weakness, and the audience gathered around him pulled no punches.

"So how do you plan on taking responsibility for this problem, King of Cavarin? This situation involves not just your nation, but the entirety of the West," Gruyere replied.

"The Empire was busy with their own mess and held off on meddling with Western affairs. You've shot an arrow at a sleeping dragon," Agata added.

It was here that Skrei's already dark expression grew dismal.

"…The aristocrats who participated in the attack on Mealtars will be stripped of their titles and have their lands confiscated. I have ordered my vassals in Cavarin to form an army and subjugate them as if they were bandits. I will see this through."

"And do you think the Empire and those aristocrats will wait around doing nothing while you get your army together?" Gruyere questioned.

"I have doubts you even *can* suppress them. Isn't there a chance your vassals and army will sympathize with them?" Agata asked.

"Th-that would never…!"

"Can you really claim that would never happen? Their lack of respect for you is the reason this happened in the first place."

Skrei had no answer for that. He could not deny that he lacked prestige. That was why he tried to become a Holy Elite…which had led him down this disastrous route.

"Hold on! Now isn't the time to be attacking King Skrei!"

Miroslav quickly rushed to his aid. However, the cards were not in his favor.

"'Attacking' him, you say? We're just criticizing his stupid excuses."

"King Gruyere is right. Even after everything that's happened, he's claiming he can do the impossible."

"Ngh…!"

Gruyere, Agata, and Miroslav had no mercy. Steel, Caldmellia, and the Holy King observed in silence. Seeing as this was due to his own blunder, Skrei stood there without doing anything.

And what's my next move…?

Wein's mind raced as he evaluated the situation.

Right now, the aristocrats and Imperial troops are staring each other down in Mealtars. Under normal circumstances, this would be an issue between the two countries, but every Holy Elite except Miroslav thinks it should involve the whole Western continent. They want to force King Skrei to pay reparations while they play the role of innocent victims.

Wein and Natra had nothing to do with any of it. As long as no one called on him, Wein could simply melt into the background.

Fat chance of that happening, though. Gruyere and Agata are going after King Skrei, but I know Caldmellia has plans for me.

The question was when and how. Wein watched Caldmellia as the gears in his mind turned. She looked over at him and smiled. Wein's face twisted.

"—What if we started by sending a special envoy of Levetia?" Agata suggested. "I wouldn't call it 'fortunate,' per se…but the Imperial army *is* focused on defending Mealtars. If we act now, I believe there is still room for negotiation."

"In that case, I'll go…!" Skrei cried out, but Agata shook his head.

"The future of every Western nation is at stake. It's not a mission for someone without a single accomplishment to his name."

"Hmph, then who fits the bill?" Gruyere asked, and Agata's gaze turned to Wein.

"Prince Wein is smart and resourceful, and he has ties to the Empire. There is no one else who compares."

Oh?

This threw Wein off guard. If he was chosen as the special envoy, he'd be in direct negotiations with the Empire. If things worked out, it wouldn't be wrong to say Wein could stress the value of Natra's relationship with the Empire and maintain their alliance. This was his chance.

Maybe he's trying to do me a solid after the whole deal with Tigris's assassination.

Agata's expression gave nothing away, and Wein mentally thanked him. However…

"—Sir Agata, I'm afraid that is impossible."

Caldmellia cut in before Wein could reply.

"Please recall the event that occurred only several days ago. Prince Tigris was killed by the Empire. How could we possibly negotiate with such people?"

"Hrmm…"

Wein *tsk*ed inside, and Agata looked disheartened. The conspiracy theory had been accepted as the truth, which helped get both Wein and Agata out of a lot of trouble. Rehashing it now wouldn't do either of them any good.

Hidden motives aside, there was no way that the Holy Elites would agree to negotiate with the people who had killed one of their own and had yet to pay for their crimes. If something like that went public, it would undermine the authority as an organization.

According to Caldmellia, that is. The other Elites raised no objections.

Well, I guess I knew I would have to can my idea for a "Moderate" Anti-Empire Party.

His problems were from here on out. How could Wein resolve this without negotiation?

As he watched the proceedings carefully, Gruyere asked a question. "Lady Caldmellia. What do you plan to do?"

She didn't miss a beat. "Declare a Holy War. We will deploy our army in Levetia's name and come to Cavarin's aid. However," she added, "the scale will not be the same as the last time we sent soldiers to Mealtars. This time, the Holy Elites will deal with the matter by combining their forces."

Everyone except the Holy King was thrown by this.

During the year prior, the Imperial fight for succession had broken out in Mealtars. At the time, Levetia had sent troops under the pretext of saving believers caught in the conflict. There were about six thousand soldiers in number, all pious volunteers. It was Levetia's source of military power.

A combined army was a different story. To bolster the volunteer soldiers, the homelands of each Holy Elite would be mobilizing their own forces. In addition, countries without a Holy Elite would offer a fraction of their troops, too. How much power would they have then?

"Wait! Isn't it true that the Imperial army in Mealtars doesn't even amount to five thousand soldiers?! Striking them with an allied force would be overkill!"

Agata's protests held some truth, but Caldmellia wasn't about to give in.

"That is precisely what the Imperial army wants you to think, Sir Agata. Believing that their only goal is to defend Mealtars when Cavarin—an already exhausted nation—is *right there* is far too optimistic. If we underestimate them and believe it is enough to threaten them with a few

thousand soldiers, they will invade Cavarin. After all, the Empire can claim they were attacked first."

It wasn't too far-fetched. There were probably a few in the Empire who had the same idea. If all went well, they'd set foot in the West.

"As for King Skrei, neither His Holiness nor I have any intention of pressing any charges. It is only natural that Prince Tigris's death, the recklessness of a few aristocrats, and the swift deployment of soldiers to Mealtars were all part of the Empire's plan to invade Cavarin."

Caldmellia pinned the blame on the Empire although this was entirely her own doing.

"The target of our resentment should be the Empire. Arguing among ourselves will only benefit them. We ought to pour our energies into combining our strengths to drive the Empire back."

She was trying to say, *They'll stop attacking if you shut up and agree to work together.*

Of course, both Miroslav and Skrei had figured out that it was Caldmellia who had come up with this plan, not the Empire. Going up against her, however, would only make them a target for more criticism. They had no choice but to nod.

"…I'll agree to the alliance. How about you, King Skrei?"

"I approve as well. I hope to atone by aiding our combined forces."

Caldmellia gave a satisfied smile before turning to Gruyere, Steel, and Agata. "What do you think?"

"I don't mind," Steel immediately replied. "A unified army formed by the Holy Elites… Enough soldiers to fill the land… It sparks creativity. I vow to persuade my king."

His perspective on life was as strange as always, but if he said he'd do it, then he would.

Next to him, Gruyere asked a question. "Does His Holiness really want this alliance?"

"But of course." Caldmellia looked at the Holy King next to her. He remained silent but gave a small yet unmistakable nod.

"…Okay. In that case, you have my army as well."

By this point, Agata couldn't possibly refuse. He was the one acting in opposition the other day so the Holy Elites would accept his conspiracy theory; Caldmellia was trying to do the same exact thing.

“Now that we are all in agreement, there is one more thing we must decide.”

Wondering what it could be, they all looked at her expectantly.

Caldmellia continued, “The representative of this joint front will, of course, be the Holy King. His Holiness’s top priority, however, is praying for peace unto all believers. We will require a supreme commander to lead the alliance.”

She made a good point. Even if you physically brought together a combined army, they’d be nothing more than a disorderly mass without strategy. Having said that, a recluse like Silverio couldn’t lead them, seeing that he’d never left Lushan.

“I believe you would be the most apt choice, King Gruyere. Will you be up to it?” Caldmellia questioned.

Despite Gruyere’s appearance, he was the greatest military mind of the Holy Elites and the most spiritual by far. He was a decent candidate, but—

“I won’t do it,” he replied. “I would never take on a position when there are other people better equipped for this job. I’m not shameless.”

“There’s someone better than you, King Gruyere…?” Agata asked.

The others looked at the king in confusion, and Gruyere shifted his gaze. “Isn’t the man who beat me sitting right there?”

Everyone’s eyes followed his line of sight and landed on Wein, who had been trying his very best to be invisible.

—WHAAAAA?! Wein screamed inside. *Damn it, Gruyere! I finally made ’em forget I was here!*

Wein gave him the worst death glare he could muster, but Gruyere blew it off. The prince offered a bright smile, gritting his teeth.

“…I’m honored you think so highly of me, but that battle was sheer luck. You excel me in the art of war, King Gruyere.”

“Oh? So you’re saying I was taken down by chance?”

You aren’t funny, you hog! Wein’s mind raced as he mentally cursed out Gruyere.

“I suppose I can if I have no choice…but I’m still young and inexperienced. I was only permitted to attend the Gathering of the Chosen on special invitation. I do not possess the skill needed to lead the Holy Elite.”

The Holy Elites looked both satisfied and relieved. Unlike Gruyere, they must have been hesitant to make him supreme commander.

Caldmellia thought otherwise. “Will appointing you as a Holy Elite solve the matter, Prince Wein?”

The round table stirred.

Her words seemed to suggest that Wein couldn’t command them only because he wasn’t a Holy Elite. In that case, she seemed to say, he should become one. It was simple, straightforward—but the position of Holy Elite couldn’t be bestowed on just anyone.

“Wait, Lady Caldmellia!” Miroslav reacted before Wein even had a chance. “A person can only become a Holy Elite once their faith, bloodline, dedication, and abilities have been accepted by all people! Even if he has the rank needed to lead a joint military alliance between royalty and nobility, is making him a Holy Elite for that sole purpose necessary?!”

“You’re right. That is why the most appropriate answer is to make the position temporary. If our joint war proves successful, he will take those honors and be welcomed as an official member. What do you think?”

Caldmellia turned to Skrei and smiled. “Depending on the outcome, I think we might see others worthy of becoming a Holy Elite on the battlefield. I shall take it into consideration together with the Holy King.”

“Th-that’s…”

Wein was stunned by Caldmellia’s silver tongue. From proposing a combined army to suggesting Wein be appointed as supreme commander, there were issues around every corner. It wasn’t as if she and Gruyere were any sort of team, but when the topic of supreme commander came up and the king volunteered Wein, she rolled right with it…and dangled the chance to become a Holy Elite in front of Wein and Skrei.

Caldmellia was starting to dominate the conversation. Unable to shake the feeling it was already too late, Wein tried to cut in anyway.

“…I understand. If the other Holy Elites have no objections, I will lead our united army under those conditions.”

Somebody say something, Wein begged as he waited several seconds. All remained complicitly silent.

Guess my fate is sealed…

Wein gave an anguished sigh. If he became the supreme commander of this combined army, he’d have no choice but to break off his alliance with the Empire. And once the West joined together to encroach on their national borders, the Empire wouldn’t just sit back and watch it happen. The Imperial

children would pause their race for the throne and form a united front to deal with the threat. Once that happened, the situation would get out of hand. The Western allies would refuse to give up without something to show for it, and the Empire wouldn't want to lose its reputation as a unifying force. Neither would be able to yield, and there was a possibility that it would devolve into an ugly clash between East and West.

That's exactly what Caldmellia wants, and that's where she'll goad them.

That's why the following thought struck Wein.

Ugh. Good thing I planned ahead.

The door to the reception room opened.

"Please pardon the interruption! A report has come in that the Imperial army is stirring!"

The eyes of every Holy Elite turned toward the messenger.

"So they're already on the move. Did they leave Mealtars to invade Cavarin?" Miroslav wondered.

The messenger shook his head. "No, the situation in Mealtars has come to a standstill. There have been no changes!"

"What're you talking about?" Miroslav frowned. "If Mealtars isn't the problem, where are they coming from?"

The messenger paused for a moment before practically yelling the answer.

"—The Imperial army has appeared along the eastern border of Natra!"

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The Earthworld Empire. The independent territory of Antgadull in the Gairan State.

East of the Natra Kingdom, Lowellmina stood in the lands governed by Marquis Antgadull.

"I was here just a short while ago, but it feels like it's been forever," she said as she gazed outside the tent. "Seeing our army lined up especially reminds me of a certain memory."

Rows of soldiers were spread out before Lowellmina, around five thousand of them. These were the genuine Imperial forces.

"Wouldn't you agree?" she asked. The princess looked next to her.

A handsome man in the prime of life stood next to her and wore a bitter expression. Grinahae Antgadull. Marquis Antgadull was the one who

governed these lands and had an extensive past with both Lowellmina and Wein.

"Ah, please be at ease. I don't mean to sound caustic. I haven't come here only to tease you."

"…I understand you would not spare time for trivial matters. This is precisely why I don't understand. Why have you stationed our troops along the border of Natra? You informed me that it is to suppress a group of bandits, but that's rare in this region, especially so close to winter…"

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"It's basically impossible. No mountain bandits would consider settling down here; they would head farther south."

Lowellmina hugged her body. Even in the fall, it was cold enough to chill you to the bone. Unless you were the type of person bounding with excess energy, it wasn't the type of place you'd want to visit for long.

"In that case, are you provoking Natra as some sort of gag? I heard that you have maintained friendly relations with them, Princess. It would be a great loss if your actions created a fissure between you."

"Don't worry. I will receive permission from Natra…no, from Wein, in the near future."

"'Receive permission'…?"

Lowellmina had sent one thousand soldiers to the border of a neighboring nation to fight invisible bandits. Would she be permitted by said ally nation to do so? Grinahae tilted his head.

"Just don't worry about it. As long as you gather our men, Marquis Antgadull, that is enough. After all, I could never accomplish that."

"Yes… Now, if you'll excuse me."

A look of dissatisfaction on his face, Grinahae bowed and left the tent.

After seeing him off, Fyshe spoke up, having stood at attention beside Lowellmina this whole time. "Is it all right to leave this to Marquis Antgadull?"

"It's fine. He won't betray me anytime soon, and he is at least skilled enough to organize our troops," Lowellmina replied. "Frankly, my own faction has me more worried!"

"We *did* scramble to piece it together…"

Even though Lowellmina claimed it was to fight bandits, she was met with skepticism from her faction. After all, they never did have a great relationship to begin with. After coaxing her party and getting Grinahae to rally some soldiers together, she'd finally gathered this army of one thousand people.

"I have my doubts, to be honest. Is there this much value in aiding him—in aiding Prince Wein?"

"Oh yeah, totally," Lowellmina replied with a confident nod. "You know that Bardloche's faction has been acting weird, right?"

"Yes. They have managed to gather soldiers and supplies even though they have not yet recovered from the recent faction war… As soon as news of

Cavarin's attack on Mealtars hit and everyone was wondering what to do, he mobilized his forces. It's as if he knew about it ahead of time."

"He *must* have known. Someone instigated a war that works in his favor just as his faction was falling apart. Goodness, Bardloche, someone is taking advantage of you." Lowellmina shrugged her shoulders. "Plus, Bardloche sprung to action while the Gathering of the Chosen is under way in the West. Skrei of Cavarin and Wein of Natra were invited to this conference. If the group decides to work together, well, it's easy to imagine what will happen next. I bet Wein will be pressured to nullify his alliance with the Empire and join in the battle between East and West."

Fyshe groaned when she heard Lowellmina's prospective outlook. As things stood, she could already tell there was a good chance that Wein was beginning driven to make this choice. What surprised her most, however, was that Lowellmina had deployed her army almost as soon as Imperial Prince Bardloche departed for Mealtars.

Couldn't she have stopped Prince Bardloche earlier? Fyshe wondered.

"I could have." Lowellmina replied as if she'd read her mind, and Fyshe jumped from her skin. "I didn't, though. I mean, he's got to start drowning before I can hold out straw and demand favors."

The princess flashed her a bold smile. Fyshe was struck by her mistress's frightening ways for a moment before venturing to make another comment.

"…But Your Highness, I still don't understand. Is placing our army along the borders of Natra really going to aid Prince Wein?"

Lowellmina smiled once again. "Fyshe, you continue to underestimate Wein's depravity. Fear not, it'll be effective, I assure you. And knowing Wein, he will offer a fair reward in return."

"…But what if it doesn't go well?"

"…I'll go on an apology tour to see all my faction leaders. Give me a month."

You're killing me here, Fyshe mentally groaned. She had no idea what was happening in Lushan or what would come next, but she prayed Prince Wein was working his ass off.

Just then…

"Pardon me! A letter from Natra!"

A messenger raced into the tent and handed it to Lowellmina. She carefully broke the wax seal, looked over the contents, and—

"—Wonderful," she breathed out with a sweet smile. "As always, Wein, you know exactly what I seek."

"Your Highness, what is…?"

"We've won the game. Send a message to Grinahae. We'll stay at the border for now. Ah, and fudge our numbers, so we seem bigger than we actually are."

What was written in that letter, and what was happening in the West? From what Fyshe could tell by Lowellmina's attitude, Prince Wein must have messed up again somehow.

Charmed by her mistress's cheerful mood, Fyshe bowed politely.

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"The Imperial army…"

"…Is it waiting along the borders of Natra…?!"

It was totally unexpected. Everyone had their eyes on Mealtars, thinking it was at the center of events. All other places had been overlooked, making the perfect opportunity for a surprise attack. It was an ambush. The Holy Elites panicked, and—

"Oh my. We're in a pickle, huh?"

They noticed Wein's blasé attitude and understood…that this was his doing.

"Prince Wein, this is—"

"Yes. As you all fear, the Empire might launch a simultaneous attack. Cavarin is not the only target; my own kingdom is under threat, too. It appears the sleeping dragon has woken up ravenous," Wein explained brazenly.

Miroslav broke into a roar. "Why would Natra be under attack?! You and the Empire are on friendly terms!"

"You might say our friendship is over. They *are* a group of cowards who killed Prince Tigris, after all. A sudden betrayal isn't out of line."

It's a bluff, everyone told themselves.

The Empire had no intention of attacking the border of Natra. They were only keeping their forces there to make it look like they were cooperating with the Imperial army in Mealtars.

And in truth, they predicted right.

Damn, Lowa is too smart for her own good.

A letter had arrived several days before the Gathering resumed. It was from Lowellmina to Wein. She had caught wind of Prince Bardloche's activities, predicted Wein's present situation, and placed her own troops along the border. Her message was essentially, *Pay me if you want me to keep them there.* ★

Wein immediately wrote down a price in response. She was probably reading it right now.

"…I understand the gravity of the situation," Caldmellia stated. Her gaze was somewhat sharper than before. "But this does not change what must be done. We have to combine our armies and overthrow the Empire."

It was a reasonable proposition. This was a sudden turn of events, and an already dangerous enemy had become a greater threat. That said, they were still up against the same beast as before.

…That's exactly why something feels off, Miroslav thought as he felt a trickle of sweat run down his back.

This had to be a bluff, but since they had no proof, Miroslav could only accept Wein's story that the Imperial troops had suddenly appeared on his borders.

The problem was how to address this situation.

"—Heh."

Miroslav suddenly heard a small laugh and looked over at Gruyere. Had he picked up on something?

Wein spoke up. "You're right, Caldmellia. Our objective has not changed. However, there is one more matter I wish to discuss. Would you mind?"

"Not at all. What could it be?" she asked.

Wein beamed. "—Both Natra and Cavarin are under attack by the Empire. *Which one will we save?*"

Everyone at the table finally realized Wein's plan.

Who is this beast…?!

Skrei was in awe of Wein.

Just moments ago, Wein was being forced to choose between East and West.

But now, the script had flipped. The Holy Elites had to make a momentous decision of their own and pick between Natra or Cavarin.

It's unbelievable… Did he know this would happen?!

It was terrifying. Skrei couldn't help but tremble at the horror. Wein's statement had just placed Cavarin back in a critical position.

"…Cavarin, obviously, if we need to pick a side!" Miroslav called out next to Skrei and in visible torment. "There's already open hostility, and the aristocrats are running loose in Cavarin. We should focus on overpowering them and reestablishing order!"

"In that case, I will relinquish the role of supreme commander," Wein replied. "As the crown prince of Natra, I must protect my kingdom. If this alliance is going to forsake Natra, I will return to my country and fight the Empire on my own."

"Grr…!"

Right. If I prioritize my own nation, Prince Wein will do the same for Natra.

In a logical sense, Miroslav was right; their combined forces should head for Cavarin first. After all, Natra had a secret arrangement with the Empire, so the country wasn't in imminent danger. There was no proof, however, of this hidden agenda, and if the Holy Elites publicly announced a preference for Cavarin, both Wein and Natra would demand justice for the West abandoning them in their time of need.

If maybe, just maybe, all of this was part of his strategy… That would mean the Holy Elites fell into Wein's trap as they were trying to corner him themselves…!

No way in hell…!

Miroslav rejected the same concerns as Skrei.

He couldn't have predicted something so complicated! He took advantage of the situation and talked his way out of trouble! If we can get his back against the wall, I know his cover will be blown!

Miroslav was trying to convince himself. He wasn't certain about it. He knew that vaguely, but he couldn't stop himself.

"It's not like we're abandoning Natra! It's just a matter of priority!"

"For a small country like Natra, that can be fatal, Prince Miroslav. If you believe Natra has the strength to oppose the Empire on its own, I am afraid you're sorely mistaken."

"…Fine! Then we'll split up the army!" Miroslav shouted, slamming the table. "We'll send some to Cavarin and some to Natra and fight the Empire on both sides."

"I can't accept that," Gruyere cut in next to him. "Dispersing our troops is moronic. Plus, our enemy is the Empire. I'm firmly opposed."

You bloody swiiiiiiine! Miroslav cursed Gruyere, as the king sneered at him. If he'd had it on him, Miroslav would have drawn his sword then and there, but this Gathering had a "no weapons" rule.

There was a part of him, however, that knew he wouldn't have made it further than unsheathing his blade. During the last conference King Ordalasse had died. And now, Prince Tigris. He knew another death, including Wein's, would totally destroy the Gathering of the Chosen.

What should I do?! It's not like I can ditch Cavarin! But if I do that, Wein will leave the Gathering!

Maybe he could drive Natra away and make an enemy out of them. No, that was a mistake waiting to happen. From this incident alone, Miroslav understand that getting on Wein's bad side wouldn't end well. The safer option was for Wein to stay neutral and divide his attention between East and West.

Not to mention the fact that if any country sympathizes with Natra, we run the risk of souring relationships in the West…!

The one with most potential to do that was Soljest Kingdom. The giant of a king could be both levelheaded and impulsive. Gruyere seemed like the type of person who'd say, *Sure, why not join Wein and destroy the West?* just for fun.

Shit! What do I do…?!

As he watched Miroslav brood in misery next to him, Agata remained relatively calm.

So what is Prince Wein plotting next?

At the moment, Wein was threatening them by playing a certain card—

one that said, *I'll leave if you don't pick me. Is that what you really want? You sure?* It was Wein who would be in trouble if they *did* choose Natra.

Will you work something out to your favor as consolation for the Holy Elite prioritizing Cavarin? Your aim is to maintain your alliance with the Empire, but this involves both the West and the Empire. Even if the West will allow it, I doubt the Empire will thank you for defying them by joining an allied army.

If Wein had intended on heading into the Empire, he would have hurried and left the table already. The fact he was still here meant he had some goal in mind. Unlike a short while ago, however, Agata could not sense any desire in Wein to go forth and engage the enemy.

If anything, it's like he's waiting for something…

Agata gasped.

It can't be…Is that *your end game?!*

Agata looked at the prince with wide eyes. Wein turned to him and grinned.

—YOU GOT IT!

Wein was buying time.

From the get-go, this alliance was made on the assumption that the Empire would attack Cavarin. But in reality, that's never gonna happen!

Everyone across the continent knew that the recent civil war had sapped the Empire of its strength. This applied to each of the Imperial children's factions, too. If you asked Lowellmina to invade Cavarin, she'd reply, *Seriously? Not now. Could we wait until spring?*

This was the case for Bardloche's army in Mealtars, too. If he wanted to invade, he'd need a constant stream of supplies and people, but his faction couldn't afford it at the moment. Even if Bardloche tried to mobilize troops outside his own faction, he was not Emperor and therefore had no authority to do so. If anything, it wouldn't be strange at all if he was criticized for acting on his own authority and quickly brought to the Imperial prime minister.

Now that Bardloche has rushed to Mealtars's aid and made a show out of chasing out Cavarin, his job is done. If he gets into a real battle now, it's

gonna wear his faction out.

Once that happened, Lowellmina would have a scheme ready that sounded something like, *You were so brave to bear the brunt of the attack, brother. Anyway, I have a shady deal for you that will keep you stuck on the front lines until you're crushed.* Wein had to avoid this at all costs, so he was guesstimating when and how Bardloche would withdraw.

The aristocrats from Cavarin running wild right now are still just a tiny fraction of the nobility.

Even Caldmellia couldn't get every noble in the country caught up in her backdoor schemes. It wouldn't be long before a subjugation army came together to take them down. If the merchants of Mealtars made concessions, this would speed up the process even further.

In other words, as long as I just hang around here, I'll be home free!

If there weren't any more surprises, the aristocrats would be defeated, Bardloche would withdraw, and the allied army would lose its reason to attack. Skrei would have a good cry afterward, but that was no big deal.

Well, like I said before coming here— I'm going to make this Gathering of the Chosen the most draining, pointless, and unproductive meeting ever.

Wein opened his mouth to throw the Gathering into further disarray.

—Then, a full week passed.

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The Gathering of the Chosen was becoming a series of rabbit trails.

When this rumor first made its way around the city, most people laughed it off. Then, a week passed by, and no news came from the Agency of the Holy King, even though the Holy Elite were meeting every day.

It was obvious to everyone why the Gathering of the Chosen had suddenly run aground.

"What's going on with that fight in Mealtars?"

"I hear they're combining armies."

"You know, I heard people have been stockpiling food."

"Sh-should we stash some away, too?"

Anxiety gripped the townspeople, and some began to act on their own.

Only the minority, however. Most of the citizens continued to pray that the representatives of the West, the Holy Elites, would quickly come up with a plan of action.

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Their prayers, unfortunately, were in vain. The Gathering of the Chosen was all over the place. There was still a semblance of conversation up until the third day, but after that, each person gradually grew more taciturn. Now on the seventh day, a suffocating silence hung over the meeting hall.

No one said a word anymore. After all, Wein deftly circumvented each and every subject.

Damn you, Wein…!

Miroslav gritted his teeth. The past seven days had been a waste of time. All attempts at conversation were either interrupted or stopped before they began.

Wein wasn't the only culprit. On the third day, Gruyere and Agata—those who were against joining forces—hopped on board Wein's time-killing strategy. On top of *that*, the two people who could oppose them—Caldmellia and Steel—removed themselves from the conversation. Even Skrei grew increasingly passive and began to think they were better off waiting for the situation to peter out than discussing an alliance among them.

By this point, Miroslav was the only one still actively voicing the threat the Empire posed, and nothing of value was lost. He was better off excusing himself from this colossal waste of time, but nothing in the situation had been resolved yet. There was a chance that a big development might occur after he withdrew and allowed the other Holy Elites to turn the conversation in their favor while he was away. He'd be a fool to leave now.

So this was the result. Several heads of state and similar leaders were submerged together in this unbearable bog of silence. Wein was the only one who still had any life in him.

If I could at least get Caldmellia and Steel on my side…

Since Caldmellia was the first to suggest the alliance, Miroslav really could have used her help, but she offered no such thing. Probably because she could immediately tell Wein would flip it around on them and turn their hopes to dust.

In addition, you could never tell what Steel was thinking. But since he agreed with Caldmellia's plan, Miroslav figured the man would put up a bit of a fight against Wein—

…Huh?

It was then that Miroslav noticed Steel was absent from the round table.

He had definitely been there when they'd initially gathered for the day. When did he get up? Steel didn't seem like the type of person to get fed up with the stagnant discussion and go home.

Steel appeared in the doorway at this moment.

"How did it go, Duke Steel?"

"It's arrived." Steel smiled and answered Caldmellia's question with a nod.

The conversation cut through the stale air and piqued the interests of the Holy Elites.

"What's arrived, Duke Steel?" Miroslav asked.

"A report from *the army I dispatched to Mealtars*."

Although Steel's nonchalant answer was brief, it took Miroslav several seconds to process this information.

"…Wait! What're you talking about, Duke Steel?!"

"I'm the one who made the request when we first heard the Imperial army had appeared in Mealtars," Caldmellia interrupted with a sweet smile. "It would be terrible if the Empire attacked Cavarin while we are still discussing our plan of action. I asked Duke Steel to send reinforcements for the time being."

"Please wait! Couldn't you have mentioned this to me?!" Skrei exclaimed. Even he hadn't been included in the conversation.

"I do apologize. If I had made this information too public, it would have brought unnecessary trouble," Caldmellia answered as she glanced over at Wein. "I did it to protect the good people of the West from the evil influence of the Empire. I hope you can understand."

"B-but anyone would see entry into my nation without prior warning as an invasion! What if they had encountered my own forces en route?"

"They would understand once they read the letter from His Holiness," Steel replied. "Besides, if they did present a problem, I was instructed to turn everything to ash, so we were certain to arrive in Mealtars without issue."

"Wha…?!"

It was a one-sided argument. Skrei was disgusted rather than enraged. He knew "turn to ash" referred to not only the entire army of Cavarin but Mealtars as well. If Mealtars burned, the Empire would never take it lying

down. What did any of this have to do with sending reinforcements to Cavarin? Caldmellia and Steel couldn't have cared less about the outcome of the Gathering. They'd been planning to start a war between East and West since the very beginning.

"So how are things, Duke Steel?"

"Just a moment." Steel looked at everyone and opened a letter. After looking over the contents for a few moments, his lips broke into a small smile.

"—Marvelous," he said, his gaze reaching farther down the table. "You've *predicted everything correctly*, Prince Wein."

Everyone present widened their eyes, and they turned to look at Wein in his seat.

Wein smirked as the Holy Elites stared at him.

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"…So, you shall withdraw under these conditions."

Meanwhile… In the mayor's office in the merchant city of Mealtars, Cosimo squared off with Prince Bardloche.

"I'll hold up my end of the bargain… But this is a fortune."

"We understand that we must pay heavily for our mistakes."

After Cosimo returned to Mealtars, he immediately met with Bardloche, who was the representative of the stationed soldiers. While he was grateful to them for protecting Mealtars, Cosimo demanded that they withdraw without needlessly antagonizing the army from Cavarin once the legion of aristocrats was suppressed.

The negotiations proceeded smoothly. Bardloche had been looking for a moment to withdraw since the very beginning, and Cosimo had prepared a budget to facilitate a speedy resolution. By promising their support as a token of appreciation for defending the city, the deal was swiftly finalized.

"Then, I'll give the orders to withdraw. You—and your merchants—should take this opportunity to do more than chase money and build needless resentment."

"Yes. We'll take that to heart."

Bardloche practically skipped out of the room. Soon after Cosimo watched him go, a door connecting to the adjacent room creaked open, and a

face peeked out.

"Is it over?"

"It's all been finalized." Cosimo nodded as he looked at Falanya.

"Thank goodness. It would have been terrible if things took a turn for the worse."

Falanya let out a sigh of relief. She had left Lushan for Mealtars with Cosimo just as Wein had instructed.

"Everything went just as Wein planned, didn't it?"

"Yes. I would expect no less of the crown prince," Cosimo replied. "I'm shocked. To think he'd get both the Empire and Patura involved."

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The sea breeze stroked his cheek. It was a familiar sensation and scent.

"I finally feel like I've come home now that we're on the sea."

Felite stood on the deck of a ship as they bobbed along the ocean.

"Was Lushan not to your liking?" asked the young girl named Apis, who served as his aide.

"It was an interesting change of pace, but this sea is my true home," Felite replied, gazing out over the vast open sea. "Anyway, is the cargo safe?"

"Yes. The goods have been loaded on the prepared ships, which have safely departed. You know, I can't believe we rounded up any and all available ships without much notice."

"You don't say. Prince Wein seems to only operate on a destructively large scale," he agreed with a smile, nodding.

"Who would ever guess he'd buy up all the surplus food in the West?"

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"…This is not good," Lowellmina grumbled in a tent set up in the corner of an encampment along the borders of Natra.

"What's the matter, Your Highness?" Fyshe meekly asked upon noticing her lady's grave look.

Lowellmina's expression was dead serious. "…I think I've gained weight."

Fyshe silently turned on her heel.

“Fyshe! Wait! I’m not finished!”

“My loyalty has run dry.”

“This is serious! Listen, I’m an Imperial Princess and the leader of my faction! That means I’m the Empire’s greatest superstar! If I’m seen as a clumsy girl who can’t even take care of herself, my image and popularity will plummet! I must investigate the cause posthaste!”

“I see.” Fyshe nodded, though it was clear she couldn’t care less. “In other words, you have no idea what caused your little stomach pouch?”

“None whatsoever!”

“Maybe you could try and remember how you have been spending your time here?”

“Umm, since this isn’t a real camp, I’ve been shopping and eating in the nearby town, comparing local specialty dishes from different shops, and staying at hot spring resorts.”

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me.”

“FYYYYYSHE!” Lowellmina cried, grabbing Fyshe’s sleeve. “Don’t you think it’s strange?! We’ve both been doing the same thing, so if I’m gaining weight, shouldn’t you, too?!”

“Ah, it seems all nutrients go straight to my chest.”

“…Dark emotions flood me! I now understand why politicians purge their vassals…!”

As Lowellmina radiated a murderous aura, Fyshe let out a heavy sigh and thrust a letter in front of her face.

“This just arrived. It seems that Prince Bardloche has begun to move from Mealtars.”

“Hmph… It’s about time.” Lowellmina looked over the letter haughtily.

“—Very well. Please tell Grinahae to withdraw the troops.”

“Understood… It seems we will return to the palace triumphant.”

“Indeed. Thanks, Wein,” Lowellmina replied. “We’re going to normalize diplomatic relations with Patura. If this succeeds, I’ll manage to keep my faction in check.”

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Buy up all the food in the West.

This was what immediately came to mind as soon as Wein heard what

was happening in Mealtars. If he could buy time, Bardloche would withdraw. Wein was confident he could stall the Gathering of the Chosen.

However, what if some of the Holy Elites dismissed the meeting? What if they sent soldiers without telling anyone? What if the Gathering was tabled and war slowly broke out?

This concern compelled Wein to buy up all the food. Even the best army in the world couldn't do anything without food. Not to mention it was the end of fall. Winter would soon be upon them, and this was the time everyone would be stockpiling food to last until spring in cities and villages. Surplus food was diminishing all across the West, and Wein knew that if he bought this up, all armies would be rendered immobile.

So, the next question was finding sales channels and assets. He had a solution to these, too—Lushan's geographic terrain and the merchants of Mealtars.

Lushan was the heart of the Western continent, and it had routes leading to every nation in the West. The merchants from the central city had contacts all across the land and asset to spares. If Wein could use them, his plan stood more than a fair chance of succeeding.

Keyword: *if*.

Even if it's to save Mealtars, I doubt the merchants will be eager to help me. Besides, even if I can use the market to buy up food, where am I going to put all of it? Mealtars is locked in battle, so there's no way I can send it there.

A missive arrived while Wein mulled over this. A message from Lowellmina that said, *I'll help you out in return for a favor.* When Wein saw this, inspiration struck.

Lowellmina needs a triumph to show off, and Felite wants to bridge their gap with the Empire! What if I can mediate between the two and improve relations? Lowellmina would get her victory! Felite would lend me boats to transport the food! And I could sell the information about the normalization to the merchants of Mealtars!

Wein immediately got to work, contacting Falanya and Cosimo and convincing the merchants by offering information in exchange for sales outlets and assets. He met with Felite, who, in exchange for Wein's mediation, agreed to pack away the food bought by the merchants on boats and temporarily store it in Patura. Wein then promised Lowellmina that he

would act as a liaison and proceeded to deal with the Gathering in a way that would buy time for his plans to line up—

"My army's food supply has stagnated, and it seems they have determined it is impossible to advance. I bet it's the same for any country that attempts to mobilize their forces. Military activity will be impossible until next year."

Steel's tone was bright and clear. Even though he'd been caught in Wein's machinations, he seemed delighted.

Buying up all the food… If that's really what's going on, then it'll be impossible to maintain a long-term campaign even if our armies can operate for the time being. We could commandeer all the towns' supplies, but—

Miroslav got that far and shook his head. If their allied armies did that, famine would spread through the West and give rise to distrust and mutiny against Levetia. The alliance was meant to safeguard the safety and order of the West. Such an act would be getting their priorities backward.

What's going on…?! Did he seriously predict all this?!

A chill ran down Miroslav's spine. Wein had seemed like a normal man, but now he came off as an unfathomable monster.

"—Fwa-ha-ha-ha!" Gruyere suddenly broke into laughter. He continued chortling and snapped his fingers. His attendants raced over with a pedestal and balanced it on their shoulders as Gruyere hefted himself on to it.

"That was an engaging spectacle. Well, time to head home."

"K-King Gruyere?! The Gathering isn't over yet!"

"Oh, but it is. It ended just now. There's nothing else to see here."

Gruyere briefly looked at Miroslav, who was baffled by his actions, and casually left the meeting hall. All the Holy Elites were shocked. It was Steel who spoke.

"Shall we proceed, Lady Caldmellia?"

"…No. As King Gruyere has mentioned, there is nothing more to discuss."

Steel nodded and turned next to Wein. "Prince Wein. You're sublime. I do hope you'll play with me next time."

"I would rather enjoy a peaceful life."

"Boooring… Oh, I know. In that case, I shall enjoy your younger sister's

company instead."

"…Come again?" Wein asked, his face twisting in displeasure.

"Heh-heh. Well then, until next time." Steel gave one last radiant smile before leaving the Gathering.

"…I shall hurry to my homeland as well. I must restore order."

Skrei was the next to leave. Miroslav followed suit and stood.

"I'll help you as much as I can."

"Thank you, Prince Miroslav."

In the end, Skrei was never appointed as a Holy Elite, and his country was a mess. It was a terrible outcome, considering it would take him substantial time and money to rebuild his nation.

But maybe he should thank his lucky stars, even though evil forces of nature had their fun with him. After all, a Holy Elite had been killed both during the last two Gatherings.

"…You're as resourceful as the rumors say," Agata said once Skrei and Miroslav had left. "I see promise in you. There is something I wish to discuss. Let's meet later."

And with that, Agata departed. Only Wein, Caldmellia, and the Holy King remained.

"I suppose I have lost again, Prince Wein," Caldmellia said. "It appears you are my greatest playmate."

"…I couldn't want anything less."

"It doesn't change the fact that you are. After all, you've weeded out the rest, leaving only myself behind."

"Oh?" Wein took a step toward Caldmellia. "And what makes you think you won't join them here and now?"

"Do you want to try? I would not mind."

They glared at each other for a few seconds. However, no clash ensued, and Wein turned on his heel with a snort.

"Later. I pray we never meet again."

Caldmellia giggled, watching him walk away.

"Where do our prayers go in this godless world—?"

"Aaah…"

In a room of the manor prepared for her by Cosimo, Falanya melted on to her desk like syrup.

"We rushed out of Lushan to Mealtars and had to enter the city without getting caught by the army of Cavarin… I'm spent…"

"The plan worked, though," replied her guard, Nanaki, from the shadows. "What's next? Are we heading back?"

"Ah, right… I was thinking we could stay a bit longer. I wasn't able to see everything last time."

Of course, everything depended on whether Cosimo gave his consent.

Sirgis was also standing by at attention. He spoke up. "Well, I shall send a letter to Prince Wein stating this."

"Thank you, Sirgis," Falanya answered. "You've been a great help to me throughout this entire matter. I was right to invite you."

"You're far too kind," Sirgis returned with a respectful bow.

Falanya smiled. "Ah, and that surprised me. —To think you and my brother would have the same idea."

Back in Lushan, Sirgis had proposed to Falanya and Cosimo that they should interfere with the armies' advance by using Mealtars's sales channels and money to buy up all surplus food in the West.

This coincidence was surprising enough, but she was shocked when he explained Wein's plan, which turned out to be the same exact thing.

The two hadn't spoken beforehand, but Wein and Sirgis had come to the same conclusion using their own experiences.

"…My plan lacked the mediation between Princess Lowellmina and Patura. I doubt this would have worked otherwise. I could never compare to

Prince Wein, who folded in the entire continent into his plan."

"But now I know how much I need your counsel. I look forward to working with you further, Sirgis."

"Yes…I shall try my best."

Sirgis then left the room to prepare the letter. Falanya noticed Nanaki's eyes had remained glued to Sirgis's back.

"Nanaki, do you still not trust him?"

"There's no reason to."

"Hmph…" Falanya pouted.

"But he does fill a role I can't. I'll just get rid of him if he becomes a problem."

"Don't say stuff like that. You have to get along."

Falanya trembled with anger, and Nanaki gave her a side glance and he continued to stare at Sirgis beyond the door.

Sirgis walked down the empty hallway.

I was abandoned by my country, betrayed by my faith, and forgotten by the world, and yet, by some twist of fate, my enemy's younger sister took me in…

An outsider might predict that this would make him hate Wein more and drive him to find the opportunity to kill the prince in his sleep. And this was mostly true.

Is there a God? If so, what is He telling me to do? I don't know anymore.

In that case, he thought, *I'll just follow my own heart.*

"…There are two exceptional members of the royal family. But only one can inherit the throne." Sirgis's gaze turned west. Toward Lushan and Wein. "I'll put the naive little princess—my savior—on the throne whether she likes it or not. This will be my revenge. Don't you call me a coward, Wein Salema Arbalest—"

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The large carriage rumbled down the road. Inside was the hulking boulder of a person. Gruyere, king of Soljest.

“What are you moping for, Tolcheila?”

Across from Gruyere sat Tolcheila, who was the size of a small pebble in comparison. Her profile was somewhat rigid as she looked out the window.

He faced his daughter. “Let me guess, Tolcheila. You underestimated the princess of Natra. Are you panicking now that you can tell she has the jump on you?”

“…!” Her face twitched.

Gruyere watched her genially and pressed on. “If the events in Mealtars last year were the only thing going for her, you could have claimed it was beginner’s luck. But now the princess has secured Sirgis as her aide, and she played a big role this time, too. She’s raining all over your parade, huh?”

“……”

“Don’t worry. You’re my adorable daughter. Even if you end up a miserable loser, I won’t say anything. I’ll find you a kindhearted husband who can heal your broken heart.”

“Father,” Tolcheila began, her eyes burning with a fiery rage. “Mock me further, and I shan’t forgive you.”

Gruyere took her fury in stride. “Be angry and upset all you want; time stops for no one. If you want something, your only option is to reach for it before anyone else. So what will you do, Tolcheila? Are you going to let the beast inside you sleep forever?”

“…Oh, this is bad,” she murmured with a smile. “I was just asking myself what I wish to do and what must be done to that end.”

Tolcheila looked straight at her father. “And the answer is shocking. My earlier statement about my greatest adversary has come true—Father, you are in the way of my desires.”

Gruyer smiled once again. “Does that make you sad, Tolcheila?”

“No, Father. I have never been more zealous.”

“Wonderful,” Gruyere replied with heartfelt joy. “In that case, I will repeat myself as well. I will be your trial from here on out. Challenge me in the name of your greed and desires—”

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“Well then, Master Felite, what shall we do about all those provisions?”

The Patura Islands. Apis and Felite were in the fortress where Wein was

once captured. It was now where the government operated out of.

"We managed to put everything away, but the storehouses are completely full. Nothing else will fit. We're already getting complaints," she added.

"No need to worry. We'll send it to Mealtars in time," Felite answered brightly.

Apis wasn't convinced. "Are you sure? I have a feeling even they'll refuse these quantities."

"They won't. After all, each of the Western nations is going to suffer a food shortage in the winter. The requests will come pouring in."

"A food shortage? Why…? Ah, I see. They sold too much of their supply, haven't they?"

Felite nodded. "Selling more means less in reserve. It's an obvious principle, but it's also easy to forget under the spell of money. Many cities and villages sell as much as they possibly can, resulting in increased poverty."

Apis's face puckered up. "…People will think we're manufacturing this famine to sell them back their food at a higher price. Won't that make Mealtars the enemy in their eyes?"

"That's why Mealtars reached out to us. They said they'll sell the food to us wholesale for a cheap price." Felite smiled wryly. "We're the middleman to help ease people's anger."

"That makes sense. They would have to calculate how far the famine has reached and the amount of food they would need to buy."

Just then, a messenger entered the room. "Pardon me, Master Felite. An emissary has just arrived by ship. They request an audience with you."

"An emissary? Apis?"

"…There is nothing scheduled for today."

So this was a sudden visitor. Intrigued, Felite questioned the messenger further.

"Did they state their business?"

"They wish…to buy the food we imported from Mealtars."

Both Felite's and Apis's expressions immediately darkened.

Patura had food. They wanted it. That was fine.

But this was all happening way too fast.

"…Where is the emissary from?"

The messenger answered this question timidly.

“Eastern Levetia—”

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Footsteps echoed in the dim audience hall. The desolate sound came from the shoes of Gospel Director Caldmellia.

“Your Holiness, everything has been taken care of.”

She attended to Holy King Silverio, who sat upon his throne. The mute figure in front of Caldmellia was no different from a lifeless corpse.

“Tigris’s death has rattled the Kingdom of Velancia, but this is nothing to be concerned over. In fact, the loss of his beloved younger brother has finally sparked something in their king. As for the matter of Natra—”

As Caldmellia gave her report, she suddenly sensed a presence behind her. When she turned around, a silhouette stood against a faint light. The tip of the sword in their hand dripped with crimson blood.

“I’ve finally tracked you down,” someone rasped. The shadow took a step forward.

It was Tigris’s servant Fushto.

“I was after the fourth person at the scene. I found the evidence and followed it here. To the Agency of the Holy King.”

Fushto pointed his sword at Caldmellia.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself? I’m listening.”

Although his tone was hushed, Fushto looked ready to kill. His murderous desire would make anyone catch their breath.

“Well done.” Caldmellia looked like a holy mother when she smile. “You’re right; I am the one who authorized Tigris’s death. Agata would have made a fine target, too, but I specified that Tigris would be the priority. After all, his departure was certain to make the events here all the more interesting.”

“……”

Caldmellia did not see lives as lives. She spoke as if they were her toys.

However, Fushto’s blade did not waver. His rage had frozen over, turning into permanent bloodlust—something ice-cold.

“You shouldn’t walk into a place uninvited. Even if I am killed, you will die, too. Do not throw your life away for nothing. There will be lovely things ahead if you stay alive.”

"…How kind of you to care for the common folk," Fushto replied. "But someone like me—someone who let his master die—has no place to return to. I will join you and present you to Master Tigris on the other side—!"

Fushto kicked off the ground. His rage shaved the exhaustion from his body, and he closed in on Caldmellia like a gale. Then, as the dark gray sword drew toward his hated enemy's throat…

Fushto was cut in half.

"Ah—?"

As blood and entrails scattered through the space, Fushto slid across the ground.

What happened?

The answer was the shadow of a small figure next to Caldmellia that abruptly stood.

"Holy King…Silverio…"

Silverio held a staff in one hand. It was more like a scabbard shaped like a staff. In his other, there was a faintly luminescent blade.

It can't be…

Fushto remembered a certain story, his consciousness fading. It was about one of Holy King Silverio's achievements, an anecdote about how he had taken on a fortress of thieves by himself and brilliantly convinced them to open the gates. This was nothing more than a urban legend. Silverio never convinced the thieves; he just killed every single one of them.

I failed you until the very end… Please forgive me, Master Tigris…

With an apology to his departed master, Fushto's consciousness disappeared forever.

"…It's a shame."

Unbothered by the blood staining her clothes, Caldmellia knelt by the dead servant and gently closed his eyes. This gesture was filled with unmistakable sympathy for the dead.

"If you had lived, we could have had more fun…"

Next to her, Silverio soundlessly sheathed his sword. Leaning against the sword-staff, he spoke. "Mellia."

Caldmellia instantly responded to her name and faced him. "Yes, Your

Holiness?”

“That prince of Natra keeps a Flahm girl by his side, correct?”

“Yes. I hear Prince Wein favors her.”

“Look into her background,” Silverio ordered. “There is something about that girl. My intuition whispers to me…”

“Understood,” Caldmellia replied with neither resistance nor doubt.

Silverio’s word was law. That was the basis of their relationship.

“Please leave everything to me. I shall do as Your Holiness commands—”

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"Wein, we're finished preparing for the return trip home. We can head out tomorrow."

"Super. We can finally get outta this joint."

In a room of their temporary estate, Wein and Ninym breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad things turned out okay, but it was total chaos for a while there," Ninym noted.

"No kidding. I swear I'm cursed or something. When we get home, I'm gonna go to a church and douse myself with holy water."

"Any idea who could have cursed you?"

"Too many to count."

"Can't argue that," Ninym said with a wry smile.

"*Siiiiiigh*… Who knows what's gonna happen trading-wise now that I've patched things up between the Empire and Patura…? I mean, there was no way around it, but I can't even sell my Imperial goods anymore…"

"Right, our trade partners. Didn't any of the Holy Elites seem promising?"

"Yeah, but he died."

"Besides Prince Tigris."

"Nah… Oh, wait. Yeah, maybe one."

Then, a knock came at the door, and a servant entered the room.

"Y-Your Highness. A guest seeks an audience with you."

"Who?" Wein asked the frazzled man.

"The Holy Elite Sir Agata."

"…Got it. Show him in."

The servant obeyed Wein and ushered Agata inside.

"I apologize for showing up unannounced, Prince Wein."

"Hey, we were both just screwed over by Caldmellia. This is nothing," Wein replied. "So you mentioned something back at the round table; what do you want to discuss?"

"Indeed." Agata nodded. "As you know, I represent the group of city-states that make up the Ulbeth Alliance. And in truth, the Alliance is on the verge of collapse."

"Sorry to hear that… What's going on?"

“It isn’t easy to explain. However, I believe this collapse is my chance.”

Agata took a step forward.

“I plan to take advantage of the Alliance’s demise and unify the cities into one nation. Prince Wein, I am here to ask for your aid—”

And thus, the Gathering of the Chosen drew to a close. It was quite a long one. Tigris had died. Cavarin fell into chaos. One situation triggered another. The people said not a single good thing came out of the Gathering.

Future historians would know the truth. This meeting sprouted the seeds of mayhem.

And Prince Wein was at the center of it all—

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Afterword

Hello, it's been a while. I'm Toru Toba.

Thank you for picking up *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)*, Volume 8. You might have guessed the theme was "Rematch: Round 2"! Volume 7 marked Wein's rematch with the Empire. This time, the Gathering of the Chosen—something in the works since Volume 3—is the stage, where he fights against the Holy Elites who rule the West. Wein was treated like an outsider during the last conference, but he'll now take his rightful seat at the table. I hope you enjoy finding out how he bests the Holy Elites.

It's well into fall as I write this afterword, and this book is supposed to be released in winter. It's been a turbulent year for everyone to say the least, but I hope the coming year will be a bit kinder to us. I'll keep on praying.

Well, even if things *do* get better, I'm sure I'll be hounded by deadlines as usual…

It's time for me to share my thanks and apologies.

To my editor, Ohara. I know I'm always causing you trouble. Even though my schedule was much more forgiving this time, I'm so sorry that I just barely made it to the finish line. It's weird… It really shouldn't be like this…

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To my illustrator, Falmaro. Thank you as always for your wonderful illustrations. A lot of important characters made their debut in this volume, and the insert pages were packed. Thank you for handling all my unreasonable demands, including the character designs.

A big thank-you also to all my readers. Now that we're on Volume 8, no one would argue that it's not a long-running series. I've only been able to come this far because of your support. I look forward to continuing the series. I hope you'll stay with me until the end.

Emuda's manga adaptation is available to read on the Manga UP! app. The second volume of the manga is coming out in the same month as this book. I hope you check it out!

Volume 9 is next. I'll probably keep going with this plotline. I think I'd like to delve more into the Holy Elites introduced in this volume and spin new stories. These are just my thoughts, though. Nothing is set in stone!

At any rate, I will do my best to surprise you even more. Let's meet again in the next volume.

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